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ABSTRACT

The experiences of 397 freshmen at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, were studied, along with the ways in which the university programs and services affect student commitment to the university. Based on a telephone interview, findings include the following: many freshmen had little contact with major university services designed to orient them to the regulations and expectations of the university; many students were confused about requirements and other academic concerns; registration procedures were the most common problem area for students; while freshmen were knowledgeable about a number of student services (academic support, financial aid, and registration), they were not aware of other student services; many students dropped out for reasons unrelated to their university experiences; some circumstances of dropouts were amenable to university intervention (e.g., need for financial assistance); and many dropouts were not counseled concerning their withdrawal. Differences among students who left school before the second semester and those who re-enrolled were examined. The experiences of nontraditional students (e.g., older students and minority students) and those of the more traditional freshmen were also compared. (SW)

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FRESHMAN EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON

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NEDIP 114

CHAPTER I

STUDY GOALS AND REVIEW OF MAJOR FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1983, the Center for Survey Research conducted a telephone survey of a probability sample of 397 members of the freshman class which had entered the University of Massachusetts/Boston in the fall of 1982.* The purpose of this study was to collect data to better understand the experiences of freshmen and ways in which the University programs and services affect student commitment to UMass. The half-hour telephone interview was designed to gather systematic information to adress the following major questions:

- What effect do the characteristics that the freshmen students bring with them (age, sex, family characteristics) have on determining both their satisfaction with their first semester's experiences, and whether they stay in school or drop out?
- To what extent do the positive or negative experiences of the first few weeks on campus affect the students' whole semester experiences and whether they stay or drop out?
- To what degree are the reasons that students drop out "preventable" (i.e. is there anything the University could do to decrease the probability of students dropping out)?
- To what degree is the formal set of services for students accessible and helpful during the freshman year? How well do they meet the needs of subpopulations—older students, minority students, traditional freshmen just out of high school?
- Which groups of students are more prone to drop out and what are the major factors influencing their decision to drop out?

* The sampling and data collection procedures, and the overall characteristics of the sample are described in greater detail in Appendix A.

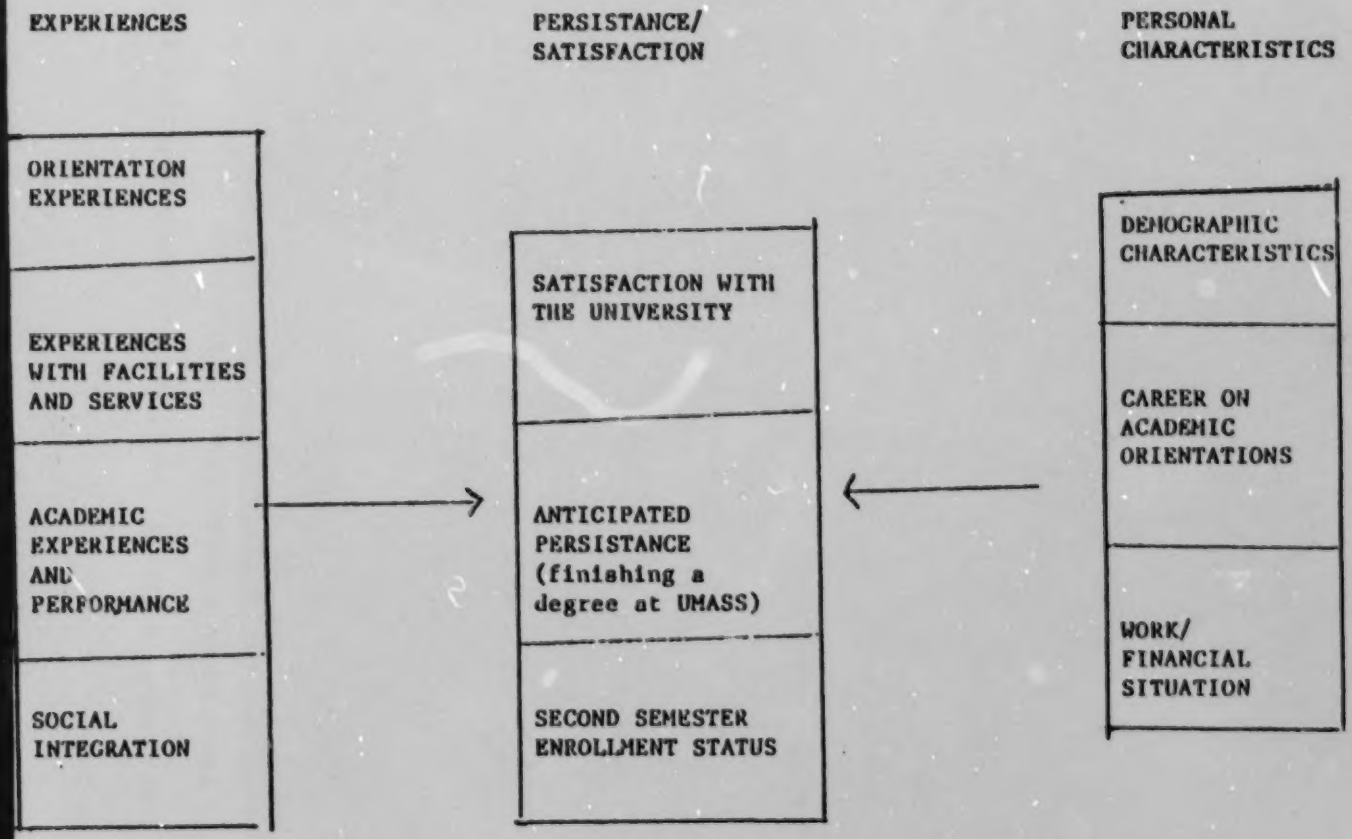
GENERAL APPROACH

This study differs from much of the growing literature on student persistence in college. The major theoretical framework that has been developing over the past few years has emphasized what Pascarella, et al. (1983) call a "person-environment fit" model. The focus of the investigations is to locate characteristics of individual students--largely those personal, attitudinal and demographic characteristics that they bring to college with them--that are associated with dropping out or remaining in school. Thus, for example, Tinto's (1975) well known model emphasizes the student's previous academic experiences, his/her goal commitment prior to entering college, and personal characteristics such as sex and race. While college <u>performance</u> in academic and social areas is factored into the model, these are also viewed as products of student personal characteristics.

The "person-environment fit" approach to studying student persistence is a valuable one and empirical studies have verified its appropriateness, particularly for traditional four-year residential student bodies.* However, it is very limited from the perspective of providing guidance to university administrators who seek to improve the programs, facilities and services that they design and manage. While personal characteristics certainly account for much of the difference between dropping out and staying in college commonsense observations of college student behavior also indicates that their <u>experiences with the university programs and services</u> has some impact. Thus, for greater utility our framework emphasizes the effects of early experiences upon persistence in the university.

* A recent study by Pascarella et al. (1983) suggests that it requires major modification to apply to a commuter college setting.

FIGURE 1


EXPERIENCES
PERSISTANCE/ SATISFACTION
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS
ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES
EXPERIENCES WITH FACILITIES AND SERVICES
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND PERFORMANCE
SOCIAL INTEGRATION
SATISFACTION WITH THE UNIVERSITY
ANTICIPATED PERSISTANCE (finishing a degree at UMASS)
SECOND SEMESTER ENROLLMENT STATUS
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
CAREER ON ACADEMIC ORIENTATIONS
WORK/ FINANCIAL SITUATION

In the study that follows we have not ignored personal characteristics and attitudes that may be associated with satisfaction with the University and persistence. However, the greater part of our attention and concern has been focused on the student's experiences with the University during his/her first semester, and their assessments of these services. We have tried to measure experiences that are potentially manageable by the UMASS administrators. We believe that many of the findings that we report can be directly translated into programs of action to improve the quality of student life at UMASS, and consequently, student's perception that they will be well served by staying in the University environment. Our basic model is presented in Figure 1. It should be emphasized that this report does not attempt to formally "test" this model. Rather, it has been used to focus our attention on various factors that can affect persistence and satisfaction.

Of course, not all dropouts can be prevented. Students come to the University for the wrong reasons, encounter personal circumstances that make it difficult or impossible to stay, or find other career opportunities that appear to be more favorable. Nevertheless, we believe that universities can improve their track record in attracting and retaining students who "fit" and who like the local culture and programs in that setting.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Among the findings that will be presented in this report are many that indicate ways in which services to Freshmen can be strengthened. In addition, the data point to some areas in which providing higher levels of service may affect the student's overall commitment to UMASS/Boston. Among the key findings are:

- o Many freshmen have little contact with major university services that are designed to orient them to the regulations and expectations of UMASS/Boston. As a consequence, there are high levels of reported confusion, and poor educational choices made during the first weeks of the semester.

- o Confusion about requirements and other academic concerns are higher among CPCS students than among students at the Harbor Campus.

- o Registration procedures stand out as the clearest single problem area for most students. Registration problems persist beyond the experience itself, with relatively large proportions of students reporting that they were unable to get into courses that they needed.

- o While freshmen are knowledgeable about a number of student services (Academic Support, Financial Aid, the Registrar) and are likely to seek support from them, other services available to students cannot even be identified by the majority of respondents.

- o Many students drop out for reasons that are unrelated to their experiences at the University. However, some circumstances of dropouts are amenable to University intervention. For example, dropouts report more financial stress, and lower financial aid than other students.

- o Dropouts are particularly critical about the counseling and advisory procedures at the University. Most dropouts received no counseling concerning their withdrawal.

- o UMASS suffers from a poor image among the students that it recruits. As a consequence, most students report that their initial experiences are better than they had expected, particularly with regard to the quality of courses and faculty.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

This report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 will provide a brief description of our sample's experiences with the University, focusing on their use and assessment of services and facilities. Chapter 3 will look at the question of whether there are major differences in experiences and personal characteristics between those who dropped out before the second semester, and those who reenrolled, while Chapter 4 will examine the experiences of higher satisfied students. The experiences of the "non-traditional" (e.g., older and minority students) and more traditional freshman

will be compared in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 fleshes out the bare bones of our survey data through the presentation of eight mini-case studies, which were drawn from a larger number of intensive interviews with freshmen. These cases represent real students, whose names and other identifying features have been changed to preserve their anonymity. In Chapter 7 we will present a multivariate analyses of the experiences and characteristics that best predict overall commitment of the freshman student to UMASS. Finally, Chapter 8 summarizes the report, and present some interpretations of the data, including preliminary implications for the management of freshman programs.

CHAPTER II

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE AT UMASS/BOSTON*

FRESHMAN EXPERIENCES

The freshmen we interviewed are generally satisfied with UMASS. Nearly one-third of them said that they were very satisfied and another 51 percent claimed to be somewhat satisfied. So, less than one-fifth of the students (including those who dropped out) reported overall dissatisfaction. Generally, students appear to be pleased with the academic quality of UMASS. Their complaints about their experiences in the first few months are focussed on their contact, or lack of contact, with the services and administration at the University.

The quality of instruction, the interest of faculty in students, the variety of courses, and the size of classes are all better than the freshmen had expected. (See Table 2.1). Most students (83 percent) rate the quality of the courses they completed first semester as good or excellent. In addition, 25 percent indicate that the quality of courses, professors or general pleasure at being in school were the best things that happened to them during the semester. The academic counseling, the career counseling, and the social life available on the campus are most often mentioned by students as being worse than they had expected.

After one semester, 41 percent of the students interviewed think that it is "very likely" that they will complete a degree at UMASS while an additional 35 percent believe that it is "somewhat likely". Of the students who dropped

* The data are weighted to remove any bias due to the oversampling of CPCS and dropout students.

TABLE 2.1

EVALUATION OF THE FIRST FEW WEEKS EXPERIENCE

	Better	Same	Worse
Availability of financial aid	40%	43%	17%
Variety of courses	37%	54%	9%
Quality of instruction	45%	47%	8%
Interest of faculty in students	53%	42%	5%
Convenience of location	46%	43%	11%
Size of classes	61%	32%	7%
Student social life	23%	29%	48%
Academic counseling	25%	55%	20%
Career counseling	15%	67%	19%
Academic standards which can be met with reasonable effort	36%	57%	7%
Safety on campus	38%	4%	58%

out, 41 percent expect to reenroll in UMASS. So, we observe a generally high degree of commitment to the University.

INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE UNIVERSITY

Eighty-two percent of the freshmen report that they went either to orientation or pre-assessment and first day ceremony. However, that means that almost one-fifth of the entering students had no formal university sponsored orientation to UMASS. Almost one-half of those students did not attend orientation either because they were not informed about the sessions at all or were not informed in time to make arrangements to attend.

In general, the students who went to orientation thought that it was helpful--one-fifth told us that it was very helpful and another 56 percent said that it was somewhat helpful. However, nearly one-fifth of the students felt that orientation actually caused confusion for them. Between 70 and 80 percent of the students who attended orientation remember hearing about schedules and deadlines of the University, financial aid, how to register and the academic support services available to students. Many fewer students remember hearing about freshman academic requirements and specific courses that they should take.

Over two-thirds (67.8 percent) of the students felt they lacked information often or sometimes during the first few weeks of the semester. When they sought information, it was most often from other students and faculty and least often from the staff in academic support or in other student services. (See Table 2.2). While faculty were an important source of information for many students, less than half of the students spoke with an advisor before they registered in the Fall and one-third of the freshmen had no interaction with an advisor during the entire first semester.

TABLE 2.2

SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF SEMESTER

	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Not At All
Other freshmen	21%	34%	25%	20%
Upper classmen	19%	32%	18%	31%
Faculty	19%	34%	25%	22%
Staff in Academic Support	12%	25%	24%	38%
Staff of other student service	6%	18%	23%	54%
Information Center	11%	27%	20%	42%
Campus radio	5%	9%	10%	76%

POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF THE FIRST SEMESTER

Students were asked about a series of things that might have made their lives easier or more difficult during the first few weeks of the semester. Most important in easing the transition was the support offered by family, friends, employer, and new friends made at the University. Some of the other things that eased the transition were facilities such as the bookstore, the cafeterias, and the location of the campus (see Table 2.3).

The severest impediments were the registration procedures (48 percent of the students reported that they made life more difficult) and the availability of classes at convenient times (35 percent said it made life more difficult). Indeed, 43 percent of those who dropped out said that the lack of availability of the courses they wanted to take was very or somewhat important in their leaving school. Two other areas that made life more difficult for at least one-fifth of the students were parking and the location of the campus.

Students were also asked to describe the most discouraging or upsetting thing that happened to them during the first semester. The most common response was to identify a problem with registration. Over 20 percent of the students mentioned general registration problems as the worst thing that happened and another 9 percent said that being unable to get into the right courses was the most upsetting thing of the semester. In contrast, 12 percent mention academic problems that occurred later in the semester as the worst thing that happened. For most students (66 percent), the problems that they encountered were not severe enough to make them consider withdrawing from the University.

USE OF SERVICES

Freshmen tended to be reasonably knowledgeable about the availability of various student services. On the whole, those who did seek out services felt

TABLE 2.3

ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY FACILITIES

	Easier	More Difficult	No Effect
The Bookstore	36%	19%	45%
On-campus childcare	2%	1%	97%
The cafeterias	58%	5%	37%
The testing program before registration	43%	15%	42%
Parking facilities	29%	26%	45%
The location of the campus	57%	19%	24%
The availability of classes at convenient times	50%	35%	15%
The response of your employer	34%	10%	56%
The response of your family or friends	54%	6%	40%
Registration procedures	31%	47%	22%
Meeting new friends at the University	64%	10%	26%

that their contact with the formal structures in the University made life much or somewhat easier during their first semester (see Table 2.4.).

The services that almost all students knew about were Academic Support, Financial Aid and the Registrar. In each case only a few percent of the students indicated that they were unaware of the presence of these services. These were also the services that the highest percentage of students had used. Twenty-nine percent had sought assistance from Academic Support, 54 percent from financial aid, and 49 percent from the Registrar. This knowledge and use of services can be contrasted with some of the other facilities that the University maintains for students. For example, only 42 percent of the students knew that a personal counseling service exists at UMASS, only 62 percent knew of the Office of Career Services, and 57 percent of Freshman Studies. Also, a small minority of students had actually sought services from these departments: 7 percent from Personal Counseling, 7 percent from Career Counseling, and 13 percent from Freshman Studies.

One service area -- Freshman Studies -- stands out as particularly helpful. Fully 100 percent of those who had contact with Freshman Studies indicated that it made life easier during their first semester. The least highly rated services was financial aid. Nevertheless, even in this case 78 percent of those who had sought services from financial aid said that their life had been made easier by the contact. In the case of the other services discussed, between 84 and 88 percent felt that their life had been made easier.

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

As noted above, students generally perceived the quality of the academic offerings and support at the University in a positive light. When asked to

TABLE 2.4

FRESHMEN IDENTIFICATION, UTILIZATION AND ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT SERVICES

	% Heard	% Sought Assistance	Assessments			
			Much Easier	Somewhat Easier	Somewhat Harder	Much Harder
Academic support	95%	31%	31%	57%	8%	5%
Personal counsel	40%	60%	40%	50%	4%	5%
Financial Aid	99%	57%	34%	46%	12%	8%
Registrar	97%	85%	34%	53%	9%	4%
Health Center	85%	21%	45%	37%	14%	4%
Office of Career Services	38%	10%	17%	70%	2%	11%
Freshman Studies	62%	22%	62%	38%	0%	0%

give an overall rating of the quality of courses that they took during the first semester, 84 percent indicated that they were either "good" or "excellent", while less than 2 percent gave an overall "poor" rating. Nevertheless, the students did have some concerns about their academic experiences, focusing primarily on their own academic weaknesses. Thirty-five percent reported that the amount of work required in their courses was "much" or "somewhat" more than they could handle.

When presented with a list of nine common academic concerns that students have, between 15 and 35 percent responded that a given item had posed a problem for them. (Table 2.5) The most common academic concerns were "always worry(ing) about my writing" (35 percent), being unable to "enroll in courses that I needed to take" (29 percent), and not being "academically prepared for the amount and type of work I had to do" (24 percent). Seventy seven percent of the students reported that at least one of the nine academic concerns was a problem for them, while twenty percent reported that three or more of these academic concerns had bothered them during the first semester.

The social involvement of the freshmen is highly variable. Relatively few students have even attended a university sponsored social event on campus (30 percent), and only 14 percent are involved in any student clubs or activities. However, most students did feel that they had made either a lot of new friends (33 percent) or a few (61 percent). In addition, the majority of students report spending some time socializing with other UMASS students off-campus (82 percent), which indicates that these friendships are of some salience. While a substantial minority (between 26 and 38 percent) of the students indicate that each of four common complaints about the social life at UMASS was a problem for them, fourty-two percent said that none of the problems concerned them (see Table 2.6). The social problem perceived by the

TABLE 2.5

ACADEMIC CONCERNS REPORTED

	% Yes
I never had a sense of how well I was doing.	20%
There is not a good match between the course offerings and my own career objectives.	23%
I had to work harder than other students to get by.	20%
There was not enough help from professors, tutors or other academic support services.	15%
The course requirements were never clear.	19%
I was not academically prepared for the amount and type of work I had to do.	24%
I always worried about my writing	35%
I could not enroll in the courses that I needed to take.	30%
I had trouble getting good grades.	22%

TABLE 2.6

SOCIAL PROBLEMS REPORTED

	Yes
It's hard to find the place and/or time to get together with friends.	33%
Other students don't seem to want to spend time with students on campus.	26%
There is too little interaction among students.	39%
The student body is so diverse that it makes it hard to find people that you want to spend time with.	32%

greatest number of students was the general lack of social interaction (38 percent), while the least common problem was that "other students don't seem to want to spend time with students on campus (26 percent).

CHAPTER III

FRESHMAN DROPOUTS

WHO DROPS OUT?

Approximately 106 freshmen who enrolled in UMASS in the fall of 1982 did not reenroll for the second semester.* Seventy-nine of these dropouts were interviewed for this study. Of the dropouts interviewed, 70 were in Arts and Sciences and 9 in CPCS. Dropout rates were the same for the two colleges. Thirty-four dropouts withdrew prior to October 26, and 45 withdrew after that date.

Most (88 percent) of the dropouts were not enrolled in school elsewhere, but 11.5 percent left UMASS to attend another school. As noted in the previous chapter, forty-one percent of those who dropped out said that they expected to reenroll in UMASS.

Four-fifths (80 percent) of the students who withdrew did not discuss their plans to withdraw with anyone at the University. The majority (69 percent) of students who talked with someone found them to be somewhat or very helpful. In total, 86 percent of the dropouts talked to no one or found that the help they received was not satisfactory.

Student demographic characteristics are not related at all to whether they drop out by the end of their first semester at UMASS. Knowing a student's age, sex, race, religion, marital status, parental status, his/her living arrangements, employment status, family socioeconomic status while he/she was growing up, educational attainment of the parents, or where the

* This number is not an official statistic, but was computed by us from the file provided by the University.

student grew up and went to high school, would not help at all in predicting whether or not that student would be more or less likely to drop out. A slightly higher proportion of dropouts than non-dropouts (91 percent vs. 80 percent) were employed in the 12 months prior to their entering school in September. However, dropouts are no more likely than non dropouts to have been working during the first semester. This implies that dropouts were more apt to change their work status in order to attend school or, perhaps, to decide to attend school because they were unemployed.

When asked about their reasons for applying to UMASS, dropouts give the same reasons as those who stay enrolled. Within the range of students accepted to and attending UMASS, the characteristics of the students before they come or the beliefs that they hold seem to bear little relationship to whether they will drop out during the course of the first year. However, the data do suggest that there are many things after the admission process which can both improve the educational experience of students and also increase the likelihood that freshmen will be able to complete the course of study at UMASS.

WHY DO STUDENTS SAY THEY DROP OUT?

Dropping out of school is often an overdetermined phenomenon. We assumed that, while students often give only one reason for leaving, in reality that reason may be only the proverbial straw. So, for example, a student who was having financial difficulties might be more likely to manage if he/she liked UMASS and was doing well in the classes he or she was taking. However, the incentive to endure financial hardship would be considerably less for a dissatisfied student who was also encountering academic stresses. Similarly, a dissatisfied student might be more likely to remain enrolled if it was financially easy to do so.

Thus, dropouts were asked to rate the importance ("not important at all" to "very important") of eleven factors which might have contributed to their dropping out. These factors were financial problems, problems unrelated to UMASS (too much time pressure in other parts of life, a better opportunity, personal problems, health), the courses (quality, availability), academic problems (too much work, work too hard, bad grades), and unsatisfactory social life. The three reasons given the most importance were time pressures in other parts of life, personal problems not related to school, and financial problems. The three factors of least importance were health, unsatisfactory social life, and too much work. The distribution of these responses is displayed in Table 3.1. Corroborating our assumption, most students indicated that more than one factor was important.

When asked in an open-ended question about the single most important reason for their leaving, over one fourth (26 percent) of dropouts gave reasons related to their academic experience in the University: 9.6 percent say that they were doing badly, 11 percent report a lack of fit between their needs and interests and the courses at UMASS, 2.7 percent say that the instruction was poor, and another 2.7 percent were dissatisfied with their program. Another fifth (19 percent) left because of financial problems. Thirty-nine percent cite personal factors as the main reason for leaving. Half of those students gave specific reasons and the other half did not. The most common specific reasons were employment (4 percent) and changing vocational goals (12 percent).

While academic reasons are frequently cited as the formal justification for dropping out, the questionnaire provides additional evidence supporting the importance of financial pressures. Dropouts report significantly more

TABLE 3.1

IMPORTANCE OF REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

Reason	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not At All Important
Financial problems	32%	20%	17%	31%
Unavailability of the courses you wanted	20%	23%	22%	35%
The quality of the courses	23%	21%	17%	39%
The work was too hard	6%	19%	25%	49%
There was too much work	6%	14%	25%	55%
The social life was unsatisfactory	9%	13%	19%	59%
There was too much time pressure in other parts of your life	40%	32%	12%	17%
A better opportunity came along	21%	22%	6%	51%
You had personal problems not related to school	38%	15%	4%	42%
Health	10%	6%	4%	80%
You were getting bad grades	22%	13%	8%	57%

financial difficulty in attending school than do non-dropouts (see Table 3.2). They are also more likely than those who stay in school to feel that the availability of financial aid at UMASS is not as good as they expected: 28 percent of the dropouts compared with 15 percent of the non-dropouts say that financial aid at UMASS is worse than they had expected (see Table 3.3). It should come as no surprise, then, that they are less likely to have received financial aid during their first semester, even though they are just as likely as those who remain enrolled to report that they sought assistance from the financial aid office. Since more dropouts were late applicants (applying after July) it may also be that dropouts were less likely to meet the deadlines for application for financial aid. As we noted earlier, financial problems were perceived as a somewhat or very important reason for leaving school.

EXPERIENCES AT UMASS

In the following section the reader should keep in mind that the act of dropping out may, through a variety of mechanisms, color the perceptions a student has of the University. Students who have left for financial or academic reasons may find it more comfortable to convince themselves that the University is not really a good place to be. Students who have a general lack of commitment and who finds the academic environment to be less than congenial may have heightened sensitivity to minor slights and disappointments. Biases also arise as a result of retrospective report--either through forgetting or the reconstruction of events in a form which matches the events to the final outcome more closely than was experienced by the student at the time of the event. We cannot eliminate these biases, but keep them in mind when drawing conclusions about what the dropouts tell us about their experiences and in

TABLE 3.2

COMPARISON OF FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY BETWEEN ENROLLED AND DROPOUTS

	Enrolled	Dropouts
Very difficult	7%	22%
Somewhat difficult	33%	31%
Not very difficult	60%	47%

thinking about what might be done to both reduce attrition and to make the experience at UMASS more satisfactory for students.

We asked the respondents to rate 11 aspects of their experiences at the university on whether each was better, worse, or about the same as they had expected (see Table 3.3). Dropouts are more disappointed with UMASS than non-dropouts. There are several areas in which UMASS is perceived by dropouts, more than non-dropouts, as being worse than they had expected.

More dropouts find the quality of instruction and the interest of faculty in students to be worse than they had expected. Dropouts, more often than non-dropouts, also report that there was not enough help from professors, tutors, or other academic support services during their first semester. The dropouts are also more likely than non-dropouts to report that the quality of instruction is not as good as they had expected. With the data from this study, we cannot address whether these reports might reflect problems of the teachers, problems of the dropouts, or both. Dropouts also express disappointment with the academic counseling. They do not seek academic counseling with any greater frequency than non-dropouts, but clearly get less help than they want. In fact, 40 percent of dropouts who had contact with academic support services report that those contacts made things harder for them, while significantly fewer non-dropouts (11 percent) felt that the contact made things harder. Dropouts are also more likely than non-dropouts to feel that the vocational and career counseling at UMASS is worse than they had expected.

We asked the students about academic concerns. Dropouts tend to report the same types of concerns during their first semester at UMASS. They did differ from the non-dropouts in their perception of three types of academic stress.

TABLE 3.3

	Dropouts	Enrolled	X^2	P
Quality of Instruction				
Better	51.9%	43.8%		
Worse	16.5%	7.3%		
Same	31.6%	48.9%	10.8%	<.01%
Interest of Faculty				
Better	48.1%	54.6%		
Worse	15.2%	4.1%		
Same	36.7%	41.3%	13.0%	<.01%
Career Counseling				
Better	12.3%	16.9%		
Worse	32.3%	17.3%		
Same	55.4%	65.7%	7.2%	<.05%
Availability of Financial Aid				
Better	34.4%	40.4%		
Worse	28.1%	15.0%		
Same	37.5%	44.6%	6.2%	<.05%
Academic Counseling				
Better	20.8%	26.6%		
Worse	37.5%	18.4%		
Same	41.7%	54.9%	12.2%	<.01%
Variety of Courses				
Better	36.9%	34.6%		
Worse	8.6%	12.8%		N.S.
Same	54.5%	52.6%		
Academic Standard				
Better	36.3%	35.9%		
Worse	7.3%	7.7%		N.S.
Same	56.4%	56.4%		
Students' Social Life				
Better	23.1%	26.4%		
Worse	27.8%	31.9%		N.S
Same	49.2%	41.7%		

TABLE 3.3 (cont.)

Size of Class			
Better	62.9%	49.4%	
Worse	7.2%	6.5%	N.S.
Same	29.9%	44.2%	
Safety on Campus			
Better	37.1%	42.3%	
Worse	4.8%	5.1%	N.S.
Same	58.1%	52.6%	
Convience of Location			
Better	46.4%	37.2%	
Worse	10.4%	16.7%	N.S.
Same	43.2%	46.2%	

First, the dropouts are more likely to report that there is not a good match between the course offerings and their own career objectives (34 percent vs. 21 percent). Second, dropouts are more likely than non dropouts to endorse, among their academic concerns, the statement that there was not enough help from professors, tutors, or other academic support services. The third difference was the tendency of dropouts to report that the statement "I was always worried about my writing" was true for them less often than those who stayed.

The respondents were asked if they discussed their academic concerns with other freshmen, upperclassmen, faculty members, staff members in the academic support office, and friends or family. The dropouts and non-dropouts were equally likely to have discussed their concerns with all of these groups except for upperclassmen; dropouts talked with upperclassmen less.

Overall, dropouts and non-dropouts report similar social experience at UMASS. The dropouts report that they engage in social activities on the campus with the same frequency as non-dropouts. They spent similar amounts of time on campus doing things the same as non-dropouts, similar amounts of time socializing with other students, and have complaints similar to non-droupouts about the social opportunities at UMASS. Yet, the outcome of this process is that dropouts feel that they have made fewer friends at UMASS than non-dropouts.

CHAPTER IV

SATISFACTION: A KEY ISSUE

Our general model for analyzing the experiences of the freshman class places considerable emphasis on their reports of how satisfied they are. Student satisfaction is a goal in and of itself for obvious reasons. It also has future ramifications: dissatisfied students are more likely to leave without completing a degree. Further, if substantial numbers of students are dissatisfied, it can potentially be disturbing enough to put a damper on the quality of the experience for other students. And, unhappy students are a poor advertisement for future recruitment.

Dissatisfied students can identify for us where and what the difficulties and trouble spots are in the University. The responses of very satisfied students can highlight what is good about the University. We can safely assume that those factors which differ for satisfied and dissatisfied students are important contributors to or outcomes of the quality of the experience that students have at UMASS and, as such, are worthy of careful attention.

Very satisfied students were more likely to see an advisor during the semester than somewhat satisfied and dissatisfied students. While only 22 percent of very satisfied students never saw an advisor, around 40 percent of somewhat satisfied and dissatisfied students never sought or got advice.

During the first few weeks 45 percent of the very satisfied never felt confused, while approximately one-fourth of the other students never experienced confusion.

The very satisfied found most aspects of the University - course variety, academic standards, social life, the convenience of the location, the academic counseling, the financial aid, the interest of the faculty in students, the

quality of instruction, and even the safety - to be better than they had expected. While dissatisfied students were more likely than satisfied students to find most things to be worse than they expected, they were particularly disappointed with the student social life and the academic counseling services.

Greater satisfaction is related to increased use of academic support services. The more satisfied students also reported that their contact with academic support made things easier, as did their contact with financial aid and the registrar.

Satisfaction also clearly relates to academic experiences. The dissatisfied were most likely to run into difficulties with the academic process - to find that there was not a good match between their goals and the courses, that there was not enough academic assistance, that they couldn't enroll in the courses they needed, and that they had trouble getting good grades. Fewer of the very satisfied experienced these difficulties and the somewhat satisfied fell in between the other two groups.

The groups did not differ in help-seeking behavior, except that the very satisfied (66 percent) were strikingly more likely to discuss their problems with a faculty member than either the somewhat satisfied (44 percent) or the dissatisfied (37 percent).

Very satisfied students showed only a few signs of having become more socially involved at the University - they were more likely than less satisfied students to have attended a cultural event at UMASS (39 percent vs. 25 percent of the "somewhat satisfied" and 30 percent of the "dissatisfied"). They were also more likely to feel that they made a lot of good friends. The groups did not differ in any other indicators of social connectedness, activity or satisfaction.

Several of the reasons given for coming to UMASS were clearly associated with satisfaction. Satisfaction is highly correlated with attending UMASS because of its academic reputation, intending to pursue a specific course of study, and being attracted by the variety of kinds of students rather than for practical reasons (proximity to home, cost, or not getting into the college of their choice).

It is important to note that there were no demographic differences between students of varying satisfaction levels. There was also no relationship between reported life circumstances (e.g., living situation, employment status, receiving financial aid) and level of satisfaction with UMASS. Very satisfied students, however, appeared to have an easier time then somewhat satisfied or dissatisfied students integrating work and school, with 40 percent of very satisfied students reporting no interference of work with school and only about 17 percent of both the somewhat satisfied and the dissatisfied groups of students reporting no incompatibility of work and school demands.

Not surprising, the more satisfied were more certain of their career goals and more likely to feel that they will complete a degree at UMASS.

Finally, satisfaction shows a striking relationship to feeling that the courses are of high quality. Fully 95 percent of very satisfied students thought that, overall their courses were excellent or good. That was true for 85 percent of somewhat satisfied students, but only for 59 percent of dissatisfied students. Further, among the dropouts, satisfaction is related to dropping out for academic reasons (both problems and dissatisfactions) but not to dropping out for personal or financial reasons.

CHAPTER V

THE NONTRADITIONAL FRESHMAN

DOWNTOWN AND THE HARBOR CAMPUS: A DIFFERENT FRESHMAN YEAR

Freshmen in the Center for Public and Community Studies program (CPCS) differed from the students enrolled in the Colleges located at the Harbor Campus in several significant ways. The most important of these is that they were considerably older. Over 81 percent of the CPCS respondents were over age 24, while only 17 percent of Harbor Campus freshmen were over 24 years old. As a consequence, CPCS students differed from students enrolled at the Harbor Campus in several life statuses which are age related -- they were less likely to live with their parents, were more likely to be or have been married, and were more likely to have children. They were also mostly women (84 percent). Not surprisingly, they, much more than students at the Harbor Campus, found that the demands of their family conflicted a lot with the demands of school during their first semester at UMASS. Similarly, they were considerably more likely than Harbor Campus students to feel that the childcare services available at UMASS made their first semester easier. The reaction and support of family and friends was seen by CPCS students as more important to adjustment at UMASS than by the Harbor Campus students.

It is also noteworthy that CPCS students reported a lower educational attainment of both their mothers and fathers than do Harbor Campus students. This, in combination with the fact that more minority students attend CPCS, suggests that these students are non-traditional in more respects than age and that UMASS is indeed serving a special population in its Downtown Campus program.

CPCS students appear to be more focused. They came to UMASS because of the CPCS program (78 percent) and they were less likely than Harbor Campus students to mention the cost of college (72 percent vs 86 percent) or the closeness of the school to home or work (53 percent vs 72 percent) as factors in their choice of school. More CPCS than Harbor Campus students applied in July or later.

In conjunction with being more focused, CPCS students are more certain that they will finish a degree at UMASS (60 percent vs 39 percent). They seemed disinterested in the non-academic aspects of UMASS. They were less concerned about the college social life and were less involved in extracurricular activities. They looked outside the University setting for their social ties, yet they used fellow students for information at least as much as Harbor Campus students and, in fact, were more likely than Harbor Campus students to discuss academic problems with other freshmen (90 percent vs 70 percent). They spent less time socializing off campus with other students than do Harbor Campus students (3 hours per week versus 6 hours) and less time on campus in general (10 hours versus 19 hours).

While the majority of the differences in reported experiences and expectations of CPCS and Harbor Campus students are age-related, a few differences emerged which seem to be attributable to the special characteristics of the CPCS program and to its location in the downtown campus building. For example, CPCS students were less likely to see the bookstore and the parking arrangements as facilities which affected their experience (84 percent and 44 percent respectively said that these facilities had "no impact" on them). And, they noted that the safety on campus is generally worse than they had expected (11 percent vs. 4 percent). Location may affect CPCS students in more subtle ways. Like older students in general, they had less

frequent contact with financial aid, with the registrar, with the Health Center and with academic support services. However, CPCS students reported contact with the Office of Career Services with greater frequency than Harbor Campus students (20 percent versus 9 percent). They were also significantly more likely to have found that service to be helpful (71 percent versus 6 percent).*

Because of the nature of the program, CPCS students took fewer courses, (a mean of 3.1 as opposed to 3.8), took more of them in the evening (1.4 versus 0.4) and worked at a job on average more hours per week than do Harbor Campus students (36 hours versus 22 hours). They also spent less time doing homework.

Another difference between students in the two colleges is that CPCS students felt generally more confused at the beginning of the semester. Only 21 percent of Harbor Campus freshmen indicated that they often or sometimes lacked essential information, as opposed to 42 percent of CPCS students. Although they were just as likely as Harbor Campus students to attend an orientation ("pre-assessment") they were less likely to hear about specific courses they should take, the freshman academic requirements, and the schedules and deadlines of the University. They were also not as likely as Harbor Campus students to feel that the orientation experience was helpful. This problem is affirmed by our case studies which point to serious deficiencies both in the presentations and materials used at CPCS (especially the "Red Book").

CPCS students did not tend to meet with an advisor before registration in the fall, but they made up for the lack of contact by being more likely than

* The number of freshmen who used Career Services and rated its helpfulness was very small, and these results may, therefore, be statistically unstable.

Harbor Campus students to meet with an academic advisor later in the semester (54 percent vs 34 percent). So, 66 percent of CPCS students met with an advisor at least once in the fall semester. During the semester, CPCS students perceived a relative lack of clarity in the academic requirements. 31 percent of CPCS students compared to 19 percent of Harbor Campus students said they never had a sense of how well they were doing. Similarly, more CPCS students (40 percent) than Harbor Campus students (18 percent) felt that the course requirements were not clear. More CPCS students (48 percent vs. 33 percent) than Harbor Campus students tended to be worried about their writing during the semester.

This configuration of findings suggests that CPCS students, because of their non-traditional backgrounds, were either less able to read the cues in the college setting or were more anxious about performance. Alternatively, one could conclude that the CPCS program is relatively ambiguous and not fully responsive to these specific needs of its students.

MINORITY STUDENTS AT UMASS/BOSTON

As with its commitment to the non-traditional student, the administration of UMASS has expressed a strong support for affirmative action in recruiting both minority employees and students. We did not attempt to ask any specific questions about discrimination, facilities or activities specially designated for minority students, or other questions that would directly tap the minority student experience. Rather, we examine the quality of the minority student's life at UMASS by comparing their responses with those of non-minority freshmen. The assumption is that if there are no differences in satisfaction, drop out rates, use of services and facilities, and other indicators of social and academic commitment, that the University is effectively meeting whatever special needs these students have.

Of the students interviewed in this study, 24 percent belonged to minority groups. Of these 13 percent were Blacks, 5 percent were Asians, 3 percent were Hispanic and 2 percent were native Americans. Almost one fifth (18 percent) of the minority students dropped out, but as noted in Chapter III, this rate was no higher than for the population as a whole. The College of Public and Community Services attracts a higher percentage of UMASS's minority freshmen. Twenty-two percent of minority students were in CPCS while the corresponding figure for white students is 12 percent.

Over two-thirds (69 percent) of the minority students were female. Although female students outnumber males in both groups, the relative imbalance among white students is less (58 percent female). Also, minority students tended to be older, with a mean age of 25, as compared to a mean age of 22 for white students. Consistent with the observed age difference, more minority students (37 percent) were married than white students (14 percent). Two-thirds (67 percent) of the married minority students had children, whereas only slightly more than half (53 percent) of the married white students had children. Half of the minority students with children were single parents whereas only 22 percent of the white students with children described themselves as single parents.

No statistically significant difference is observed in family socio-economic status. The overwhelming majority of the students in both groups described their family background as reasonably comfortable (45 percent of blacks and 51 percent whites).* In terms of parental education, most minority students reported that their parents had only some high school while the majority of white students said their parents have completed high school.

* This distribution is affected by the high proportion of foreign-born minority students, who typically come from middle or upper class families.

Virtually all of the white students (82 percent) and a substantial majority of the black students (69 percent) were employed during the school year.

An area of noticeable difference between the two groups is in student residence. Virtually all of the white students graduated from high school in Massachusetts, whereas only 67 percent of the minority students grew up in Massachusetts. Another distinctive characteristic of the minority student body is that it has a substantial number of foreign students. One out of five of all the students who identified themselves as minorities are foreign students, whereas only 0.3 percent of the white students are classified as foreign students.

MINORITY EXPERIENCES AT UMASS

As indicated in Chapter IV, despite the social burdens that minority students often bring with them there was no difference in the dropout rate between minority and white students. Although an expected relationship between race and dropping out is not found in the data, it appears that minority students, because of their age, marital status and living situations, often faced more severe financial and time pressures. When asked about the tensions between family and school obligations, over one-quarter of the minority students said that their family responsibilities interfered a great deal with school. Less than one-tenth of the white students gave the same answer. Over half of (55 percent) of the minority students reported that they face financial difficulty attending UMASS, whereas only 39 percent of the white students reported having financial difficulty. Also, more minority students (33 percent) than white students (14 percent) indicated that they work harder than the average students in order to meet the requirements of courses.

Among the major issues addressed by this study is the extent of support provided to freshmen students by various university services. In general, minority students utilized the services and support systems available in the University at the same rate as white students. Although minorities attended orientation less frequently than whites (70 percent vs. 82 percent), the percentage of minorities who reported problems with orientation is not significantly higher than white students (9 percent vs. 6 percent) minority students were just as likely to have seen an advisor, sought and received information from various sources such as other students, faculty and the University bureaucracy.

Minority students reported seeking and obtaining help from such support services as personal counseling, freshmen studies, academic support, etc., with the same degree of frequency as white students. In general, their degree of satisfaction with service was the same, but minority students were more likely to report that they were helped by the financial aid office. Of those who sought financial assistance, 47 percent of minority students compared to 28 percent of white students said they found dealing with the financial aid office made their life easier. Forty-two percent of minority students compared to 30 percent of white students receive financial aid that covers all of tuition.

Overall evaluations of the semester's academic experiences showed little divergence between minority and white students. Minority students gave the University the same overall favorable rating as white students in such areas as quality of instruction, interest of faculty in students and availability of courses. Although more minority students reported having academic problems than white students, (31 percent vs 19 percent) they reported a higher degree

of satisfaction with academic counseling and support services (36 percent vs 23 percent).

Even though minorities spent the same amount of time socializing on campus, and engaging in University activities their rating of the social life in the University was more favorable than the white students. Only 12 percent of the minority students reported that they found the social life in the University to be worse than they expected. The corresponding figure for white students is 33.3 percent.

Overall, there is an indication that minorities are slightly more satisfied than white students with the University. A careful analysis of the data suggest that the University is perceived more favorably by minority students in such critical areas as counseling, financial aid and social life while there is virtually no difference in the evaluation of courses, professors, tutors, etc. There is a strong indication that the initial positive experience of minority students has increased the likelihood that they will be able to complete their course of study at UMASS. By a wide margin (51.6 percent vs. 37.6 percent), minority students were more likely than non-minority to say that it is very likely that they will complete a degree at UMASS.

CHAPTER VI

STUDENT CASE STUDIES

THE SATISFIED STUDENT AT UMASS

Name: Maria Madio

Age: 19

Race: White

Employment: Unemployed

Education: Suburban high school

Professional Studies

Maria Madio came to UMASS directly from a South Shore suburban high school. She plans to be a doctor and is currently majoring in biology.

Unlike many UMASS students, Maria comes from an upper middle class professional family with a long tradition of college education. Her father, who is a physician, was a major influence in her decision to go to college. Although she never doubted the need for college, Maria was cautious about planning her education. With the help of her father and guidance counselor, Maria began applying to carefully selected schools with medical schools or good pre-med programs around New England in the spring of her senior year. Even though she had excellent grades and the financial resources, she was rejected by many of the colleges. Unable to get into any of her preferred schools, Maria decided to come to UMASS to spend two years taking electives and core requirements in preparation for transferring. She is hoping to transfer to Tufts University by the end of her sophomore year. She said her father, an alumni of Tufts, is diligently working to secure a place for her.

Maria's transition from high school to college was relatively smooth and her adjustment to UMASS has been largely successful. She was helped a great deal by friends and acquaintances from high school attending UMASS. Maria did not know what to expect in college except that it would be harder than high school. She also suspected college would be large and impersonal. She said both of her suspicions were soon confirmed by her first few days in the school.

Maria had some problems during registration. Because she was unable to attend the orientation session due to conflicting work schedules, Maria depended mostly on the registration office for advice and information. Although the registration office has an information desk to assist students, she said they "were of no help at all." The information desks are often run by other students who are uninformed about registration procedures. According to Maria, the regular workers at the registration office also lacked complete information. "They often answer part of your question and send you over to others". Aside from the lack of information, Maria said, she was bothered by the attitude of the workers. She said, "they seem not to want to help anybody at all and seem irritated whenever asked for assistance." She felt the school should change this image.

Aside from her problem with registration, Maria's first few weeks at UMASS went smoothly. She was able to pick up all the courses she wanted. Her professors were "accessible and helpful", while fellow students were "nice and friendly."

Overall, Maria's first year at UMASS was a success. She has managed to get excellent grades. She has gotten to know a few professors personally and has established close friendships with a few of her classmates.

Although Maria feels that there is no real social life in a commuter school, she admits that she has met a lot of people and spends "hours" sitting down and talking in the cafeterias. Maria has never participated in any formal activities or attended any school events. She summed up her social life at school by saying "the nature of the school makes it harder to feel like a community."

Maria has firm career goals and believes that she has the academic ability and the financial resources to realize them. Although initially disappointed about not getting into Tufts, Maria said that she has regained her self-confidence and enthusiasm. Her successful year at UMASS has reinforced her determination. Overall, she is pleased with UMASS; despite its image as a "public university", Maria feels, UMASS is a "respectable institution with rigorous academic standards." She praises her instructors as competent and devoted to their students and believes that the class material is comparable to Boston University and Northeastern.

Maria has two suggestions. First, she wants UMASS to work on its image. She feels the school would be able to attract "a better quality of students" by launching an aggressive public campaign in area high schools. The University has to convince students and parents that it has excellent faculty and facilities in the school. Maria says, "A lot of people do not know about UMASS standards and don't even consider it an alternative." Secondly, she would like better maintenance of University facilities. For example, she said that malfunctioning elevators, leaking roofs and burned out bulbs should be repaired more quickly and that the University could label its buildings, and organize directories and room numbers more appropriately.

Name: Sarah Smith

Age: 19

Race: White

Employment: Full time

Education: Boston Public High School

College of Liberal Arts

Sarah came to UMASS from one of the largest and least well thought of public high schools in Boston. She works full time in an Allston food store.

Sarah graduated last year and had planned to work for a "couple of years" before going to college. However, she was forced to change her plans and enroll at UMASS this year due to unusual family circumstances. As part of her parent's divorce settlement, Sarah's father has to pay child support while his two children are in school. Sarah was advised by the family lawyer and her mother to remain in school as long as she can so that the support from her father would be maintained.

When she first agreed to the idea of going to college, she applied to a variety of colleges around Boston, including Boston University, Boston College, Northeastern and UMASS. She was accepted by all of them, but chose UMASS for financial reasons. She feels that UMASS is providing a comparable education for a fraction of the cost of the private institutions. Although Sarah was pressured to go to school, she doesn't regret her past year's experience at UMASS. In retrospect, she feels that she has gained a great deal.

Unlike many of her fellow students, Sarah was already well acquainted with college when she first came to UMASS. As a senior in high school, Sarah participated in Northeastern's Pre-College Program taking four college level courses. Sarah faced no real problem in the initial first few weeks at

UMASS. Her registration went smoothly and she was able to get into all the courses she wanted. Although her goals for registration were met, Sarah observed certain problems with the registration process. First, the orientation session was too crowded. There were too many people in one room and it was difficult to hear the speaker. She said that, except for a few students who sat in the first few rows, nobody was able to hear anything. She suggested that students be divided into smaller groups in the future. She also has noticed the delay and long lines created by problems unrelated to immediate registration tasks, such as financial aid issues. She feels that problems such as financial aid should be resolved prior to registration.

In the first semester Sarah took four courses. She enjoyed all of them and felt that the professors were good. In fact, she rated the UMASS professors better than Northeastern's. At first she was intimidated by the older students. She said she avoided participation in class fearing that the older students might think of her as "silly or immature". However, she was able to overcome this fear and says that later in the semester she came to see the benefit of having these older students. Now, she says "they have a sense of humor and are fun to be with".

Because of the lack of time, Sarah said she has had no opportunity to participate in any social activity in school. She is in school from 8:30 am to 1:00 p.m. She then goes directly to her 38 hour a week job. Except for an hour lunch break, all her time is spent on campus in class. Sarah seemed dissatisfied with such a tight schedule. She regrets the fact that she has made no friends at UMASS and "never even had the chance to visit the library." Aside from her tight schedule, her social life in the school is frustrated by the fact that she couldn't get into the pub, where she says "the real fun is."

Sarah is uncertain about a career choice. She is leaning towards "fine arts" but is concerned about "practicality". She feels that she should make a firm career decision by her junior year.

Although Sarah thinks highly of UMASS, she is planning to transfer to Wellesley College in her junior year. She feels that her chances of landing a good job and getting into a professional school would be enhanced by graduating from a "good name college". She said that she is planning this knowing full well that Wellesley is not going to offer her much more than UMASS but "that it is all a matter of image. I went to the Boston school system and if I graduate from a state college it would be difficult to get where I want to go".

Name: Greg Warriner

Age: 21

Race: White

Employment: National Guard

Education: Suburban high school

College of Liberal Arts, droupout

Greg Warriner, who describes himself as "middle-middle class", came to UMASS from a South Shore community. After graduating from the local high school, Greg worked as a clerk for a year at an insurance company. He then spent six months in a Texas training camp as a member of the National Guard before enrolling in UMASS. After an unsatisfying semester at UMASS, Greg dropped out, and is now preparing to transfer to Bridgewater State College.

Greg consulted no one except his father about his decision to go to college. Due to the two-year gap between high school and college, Greg did not have the benefit of advice from his guidance counselor or teachers.

However, Greg feels that his father is in the best position to offer guidance because of his 20 years of experience as a computer programmer.

Greg's decision to go to college was influenced by his desire to become a computer programmer like his father and the attractive financial incentives offered by the National Guard. His full educational expenses are paid by the National Guard and he is assured a programmer's position in the Guard upon completion of his degree.

Greg applied to UMASS and Bridgewater State College in February 1982. He was accepted by both and chose UMASS primarily because of its proximity to his parents' home where he lives.

His dissatisfaction with the University started in the first few weeks of the first semester. Because of an overlap of his military training period and school opening, Greg started at UMASS in late September, missing both the orientation and the formal registration period. He said he felt confused and frustrated; he did not know what courses to take and generally "how to go about it all." His repeated efforts to obtain help from the registration office was fruitless. Although he eventually managed to register and get all the courses he wanted, this experience left him bitter and disappointed. He said, "Initially I blamed myself, I thought it was all my mistake, but after a while, I realized that this place is not for me. It's too big and impersonal. I don't want to spend 4 years here".

Although he was disappointed with the University, Greg decided to withdraw primarily because UMASS lacks a computer science program. Greg entered UMASS with the hope that he would major in computer science. However, he discovered by the end of the semester that UMASS didn't have a computer science department and didn't offer a major in the field. Rather, the computer science courses are under the mathematics department and can only be

taken as a minor with another field as a major. Greg said he was startled by the fact that "such a big university would have no computer science program in this day and age". He soon decided to transfer to Bridgewater State College which has a full computer science major.

The second area of dissatisfaction for Greg was the lack of social life in the school. Despite his efforts to become active in the UMASS community--he joined the Chess Club, History Club and Science Fiction Club--he found no satisfying social life. He had difficulty meeting people and establishing friendships. He feels that the Bridgewater campus will provide him with a better social atmosphere. He plans to live on campus in a fraternity house which he feels would satisfy his desire to have "memorable college years."

In addition to the lack of preferred program and absence of social life, Greg's decision to transfer is very much influenced by the poor image of UMASS. He stated that UMASS suffers from a bad image and lacks prestige and confided that his friends tease him about the fact that he goes to "ZOO MASS". Although Greg admits that UMASS doesn't deserve its reputation, he says the image problem is really serious. He said "people think this place is falling apart both physically and in its academic standing." Gregg believes that Bridgewater State College has a better reputation academically than the University of Massachusetts.

Name: John Bellevue

Age: 42

Race: White

Employment: Graphic Designer

Education: High School

CPCS, dropout

John Bellevue is a 42 year old graphic designer for a Boston area newspaper. He came to CPCS after 10 years of experience in graphic design with the primary goal of enhancing his career. Although he has a great deal of experience and is considered competent in his work, he hasn't been able to land an interesting and responsible job. He suspects his lack of "paper" (degree) was the major reason for denial of promotions and other opportunities.

Despite the fact that John is an intelligent and mature man, his decision about college seems to have been made without serious thought. He appplied to CPCS in late August and sought admission at no other school. He consulted only one person, a CPCS graduate, about his decision. His choice of CPCS seems to be based only on the experience of his one contact from CPCS and some vague assumptions that they would take life experience as credits. When I asked about how the CPCS curriculum (which is heavily oriented towards human services) would fit with graphic design, John's replied that he needed a degree - any degree.

John stated that his initial expectations about college were based on his friend's advice. The friend described "College III" as easy, flexible and accommodating. He also told John that there is a great deal of support, varied programs are available, and a generally "independent off-campus type of learning" was prevalent. Contrary to his friend's description, what John

perceived in his first few days was total confusion. He was particularly bitter about the orientation experience which he says failed to operationalize the concept of competence and assessment. The orientation staff kept repeating the need to be self-motivated while the "Red Book" designed to accompany the orientation session was confusing and useless to him.

John registered for and regularly attended three evening courses. Even though he enjoyed the content, he didn't know how they fit with his overall educational strategy. Repeated questions to professors and fellow students about the relevance of these courses to his competency were not answered. Everybody told him that he has to organize his work as it fits his needs. In class he often found discussions unstimulating, attendance sporadic and professors disinterested. He said, "you really have to probe them to get any answers about anything". John also said that his fellow students were all confused and didn't know what they were doing. Although the bureaucracy tried to be helpful, it was not. "Three secretaries would tell you three different things". Simple information such as classroom numbers, professor's offices and department locations were hard to uncover.

Overall, John was very disappointed with his experience at CPCS. He felt "dumb", and incapable, and his frustration finally led to his withdrawal. He is convinced that CPCS is not for him: "There is no room for people who want to learn". He said the motto of many of the students seems to be "just get the degree as fast as you can and get out." John admits that he didn't plan his education carefully. However, he says many of the problems he encountered were the failure of the college to implement the CPCS concept rather than his own shortcomings. He feels the college could improve its program by clarifying the goals and clearly delineating the students' responsibility. "The college promises too much and leaves the student to himself," he said.

Despite his experience with CPCS, John is still determined to get a college degree. He was accepted by the Massachusetts College of Art and will start in September, 1983. He believes his education at MASS ART would be relevant to his career in graphic arts. His employers, who didn't have any encouraging words for his CPCS venture, have now changed their minds and are willing to help him financially and accommodate his time demands.

John has the following suggestions for CPCS: (1) structure the program; (2) attract better quality of students; (3) clarify and simplify the program; and (4) broaden the program to accommodate people who have career objectives other than human services.

CPCS STUDENTS AT UMASS

Name: Judith Lyons

Age: 29

Race: White

Employment: None

Education: High school, out of state

Registered at CPCS

Judith Lyons came to CPCS from three years of work experience as a community organizer in a CAP agency, which was her only career related experience, post high school. She reported that she was very sick when she got out of high school and was unemployable for several years. She then had a daughter who is now six, and did not start working until her child was old enough to go to day care. She is a single parent.

Her major motive in applying to college was her belief that her job was going to disappear because of Reagan's economic cuts. She did not feel that she could get a comparable job that would be both interesting and provide support for herself and her child. When she first decided to go to college,

she applied to a variety of private institutions in the area, including Boston College, Tufts, and Boston University. She found that the schools did not wish to accept her into their regular college program because of her age and her family situation. Instead they tried to encourage her to enroll in their evening courses for adults, which she did not want because she wanted to go full time and to also spend time with her daughter. She heard from a friend who is enrolled at the Harbor Campus that an older student would feel comfortable at UMASS. She applied to CPCS, because she thought it would be hard to get from her home in Medford to the Harbor Campus.

Judith mentioned that both friends who were going to college and colleagues within her agency supported her decision. She commented, however, that one staff person in a community organizing position had counselled another friend not to go to CPCS because "only dumb people go there". This assessment did not appear to bother her particularly.

Judith came with three clear expectations. The first was that, because of the competency system, she hoped to accelerate her program and graduate in two and a half years. She felt that because she was willing to work hard, and because competencies can be pursued outside of regular class periods, that CPCS offered flexibility for her to do this. A second expectation was that the initial adjustment would require her to work very hard on what she knew were her academic weaknesses. "I knew through my job what my weaknesses were because everybody told me. I am not very good at writing and I have a lot of difficulty articulating my thoughts in a group setting. I wanted to work on these competencies first." Her third expectation was that CPCS would provide her with a comfortable supportive social environment because of the fact that many of the students would be like herself, i.e. older with children and family obligations. Judith feels that CPCS has met her expectations, and on the whole she is extremely satisfied.

Although she is highly motivated and determined, her adjustment to CPCS has not been without problems:

> When I first came here I was totally lost. It helped that people were my age, but it was a whole different system and I couldn't understand it. The "Red Book" lists all of the competencies and tells you about them but it doesn't help you by explaining how to get them. Our initial assessment was very confusing. There was too much information and too little depth. Some professors from the Center would get up and say: I don't have time to tell you much about the Center, but let me tell you a little bit. And what he said was often confusing.

Judith repeatedly remarked on the difficulty of getting information about requirements, about when courses would be offered, and the "inside dope" on how to make it through CPCS.

Judith felt that her coping with the confusion was helped by her advisor, who was "very knowledgable and always pushed me to discuss myself, what I wanted, and how I could get there." She commented that her advisor made adjustment to taking the initial competencies much easier by not simply turning work back and telling her to do it over again, but by providing her with detailed feedback on what was strong and what was weak and requiring her to redo some tasks. In addition, her advisor was willing to give her straight information about the characteristics of other advisors in the school -- who was hard, who was more easily available, who was stimulating -- information which enabled her to make good choices about other advisors as she expanded her contacts with the professors. Judith also felt that it helped to take a balance of competencies during the first semester, some of which were easy for her, so she could do them quickly (such as one on community organizing which was what she did in her previous job) and some of which were in her academically weak areas. She also felt that it helped a great deal to be on the campus a lot, to go to all of her classes, to keep in touch with the teachers, and to try and broaden the number of advisors and professors with whom she had contact.

Judith gave examples of students whose adjustment was more difficult. She commented that many people that she knew were very disappointed with their assessment advisors and did not get the "inside dope" from them that she had received. She pointed out that her age made adjustment easier and that the school is most confusing for the small number of younger students. For example, she described one 19 year old person who transferred from Boston State:

> "I didn't think she would survive because it was so hard for her to participate in classes." We would all refer to our previous experiences to illustrate our point and she didn't have any".

She also commented that:

> "Some people just get lost here. There are people who need more handholding than CPCS provides. Some of them stay around here for years taking only one or two competencies a semester. They don't seem to know how to meet the professors and make contacts".

She also indicated that many of the people who did hang around for years were perhaps less highly motivated than someone like herself.

A final point was that she had had some "wonderful professors" in the first semester. She particularly praised a professor in her writing course. She said "I'm still not a great writer, but I always feel that I can go back to her for help if I'm working on a paper in some other course and have a block on it".

Judith had two sources of problems, some of which did not clearly emerge until the second semester, some of which were immediately apparent during the first semester. The first area has to do with child care arrangements. When she started last semester, she had a part-time job and took a lot of afternoon classes. She found that it was exhausting to play all of these roles. This semester she has stopped working and has tried to take most of her classes in the morning so she can be home when her daughter comes home from school. Nevertheless, she has had problems with child care and is particularly

irritated that despite the large number of students with children vacation weeks at UMASS do not coincide with school vacation weeks.

Next semester, however, her life will be even more difficult and she is already rather anxious about it. Most of the core required courses in her major area will be held in the evening. She is not quite sure what she is going to do but she thinks she may try getting a job in the morning, stay with her daughter in the afternoon, and get a babysitter paid for with the salary, to attend classes at night. She again expressed some irritation at this scheduling practice, feeling that there should be more flexibility for people who have multiple obligations. She pointed out that this conflict for her was a preventable one. There is an informal policy in this Center of scheduling core courses in the evening during the fall semester and in the day during the spring semester. However, since this is not written down anywhere, Judith did not find out about it until she was already into this semester. If she had known, she would have taken many of those core competencies this semester and had more flexibility with her schedule.

The second area of frustration for Judith is the difficulty she has had getting adequate advice for choosing a major and understanding how to complete requirements for a bachelor's degree. She pointed out that the written materials passed out by the school are very clear on how one can receive a certificate from one of the various centers. However, she stated that they do not explain clearly what the requirements are for getting a bachelor's degree. She indicated that the materials that were passed out during orientation did not adequately explain the elective system, and that she did not find out about the full nature of the distribution requirements until the middle of second semester. She feels she would have taken somewhat different sets of courses had she known.

Judith described what happened to her when she began to explore various majors:

> Again I felt completely lost. I couldn't find anybody to talk to. [In both centers] I tried to make appointments with the professors that people told me I should see. But I would call and come and they were never there and they would never call me back. The professors [in one program] were more confusing than the "Red Book". I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to take to major. When you find out what you want to do you should be able to go to someone who can tell you what to do, how to do it, and what kind of a job I could get with a degree in that area. I never found a professor who could tell me that. But I stumbled on a very knowledgable person who helped me out: the department secretary. She knew all about the requirements and she knew all about what kinds of jobs people had been getting. She was the only person that I relied upon for straight information.

Judith pointed out that her career counselling needs were probably different than the average CPCS student. Most CPCS students come in and get a degree in an area in which they are already working. Thus, they understand the opportunity and career structure associated with their degree, and are very likely to be going back to an existing job for a promotion. Because Judith wanted to try something completely different, she did not have this background or set of experiences, but felt that there was nobody in the departments she had contacted who was available or able to provide that information. "Eventually I had to figure it out on my own, or by talking to students."

Despite these problems, Judith is enthusiastic about the quality of the courses that she has taken, what she is learning from them, and the way she feels she is being prepared for future employment in her new area of choice. She does not perceive any barriers to completing her degree in the two and a half years she has planned. She has found the social life here pleasant, although most of her friends are those she has had before she came here. She spends most of her days from about 9:00 until 2:30 on the campus, and spends most of her evenings with her previous friends and her child. She seems entirely satisfied with this. She has recommended CPCS to other friends and

has in fact persuaded one of her close friends to enroll next semester. Judith's basic advice to other students would be to be assertive, to keep making contact with the professors, and to make sure that you keep on a schedule which permits you to maintain contact with the people as well as the official requirements. In addition, she recommends that students use every means to obtain information about informal policies and requirements which are not clearly specified. She suggests that 1) CPCS rewrite existing orientation and requirement materials so that they would be up to date and clear, cover some of the informal policies, and ensure that students have better warning about courses that perhaps will not be offered when people thought they would be and 2) CPCS should try and provide better drop-in child care to correspond with the needs of the many working single parents.

Name: Sharon Wright

Age: 25

Race: White

Employment: State Employee, full-time

Education: 1 yr Community College

Enrolled at CPCS

Sharon Wright currently works as an aide in a state health institution. She came to CPCS with a full year's credit from two local community colleges. However, she is enrolled as a freshman without any of her credit transfers.

Her main reason in going to college is career mobility. She feels she has a lot of experience but lacks only a college degree. She believes she will get an interesting and responsible job as soon as she receives her diploma.

Sharon was encouraged to go to college by her supervisor (who also obtained a degree at CPCS). Her boyfriend has provided emotional and financial encouragement for Sharon's continuing education. She seems to be very pleased by the fact that she is attending college and doing the required work. She has no doubt that she has made the right decision and sees no worthwhile alternative to attending school.

Sharon first applied to CPCS in July 1982 and was accepted in mid-August. Tuition at UMASS is paid by the Commonwealth for State employees, so Sharon did not consider other schools. Aside from financial factors, her decision to come to UMASS was influenced by the innovative and flexible program of the CPCS. The diversity of the student body and the liberal reputation of College III have also attracted Sharon's attention.

Sharon stated that initially she had high expectations about college and felt enhanced self-esteem. Even though the concepts and procedures of College III are confusing, Sharon had little problem adjusting. Her supervisor, who attended CPCS, was "a great help" in orienting her to the ways of College III. She was lucky enough to be assigned a student advisor who was "indispensable" in the orientation period.

Although Sharon has experienced little difficulty in learning her way around the University, she admits that CPCS could be bewildering for new students. She emphasized the inaccessibility of faculty and the incomprehensibility of the "Red Book," which she described as totally useless. She was also disturbed by the inability of the professors to clearly explain the nature of the program and to describe the work required.

Sharon took two classes in her first semester: "Reasoning for Moral Issues" and an assessment class. She did not like the Moral Issues course. She found it boring and felt that the professor did not have "an appealing style". She felt the assessment class was taught useful information on how to

get competencies. Her description of the two classes indicates that Sharon prefers the non-structured courses to the regular courses and feels that she could do better and learn more by independent work.

Sharon feels very comfortable with and enjoys the diversity of the student body. She feels comraderie with fellow students. She used terms such as "we are in the same boat" and "most of them work like me". She particularly enjoys the older students because "they have so much to say about their life experience".

Sharon seems particularly skilled at using the various support systems available at the University. She has had no problem with the bureaucracy and reported general satisfaction with registration and orientation. With the help of her boss and student advisor, Sharon was able to successfully register and orient herself with no confusion or disappointment.

Overall, Sharon is very pleased with her education at CPCS--so much so that she has already convinced a coworker to enroll in the fall. She is advising her friend to keep an open mind, make use of fellow students' advice and "ask as many questions as you have." Sharon believes that much of the confusion at CPCS results from students' unwillingness to ask questions for fear of looking "dumb".

Sharon is making a conscious effort to avoid friendships and generally keeps to herself. She confided that she has alcohol problems, which, she feels, are aggravated by participating in activities. She believes she can stay calm and sober by avoiding people. Besides, her work schedule leaves Sharon hardly any time to socialize.

Sharon decided to become a clinical psychologist. Her decision is derived from her strong desire to counsel for drug and alcohol abusers. As a reformed alcoholic, Sharon feels strongly about alcohol abuse and is committed to the eradication of this "social illness". She believes her education at

UMASS is preparing her for this career. She appreciates the flexibility of the program which is affording her the opportunity of working full time and earning a degree. Despite the absence of classroom learning, Sharon feels that she is learning a great deal. She repeatedly made favorable comparisons between her education at UMASS and more expensive schools such as Northeastern and Boston University.

Sharon is presently earning $150 a week. She plans to work in the same position for the next two years while she completes her education at CPCS. She hopes to obtain a professional counseling position as soon as she graduates.

Sharon seems entirely satisfied with UMASS. Her only complaint is that the Park Square Campus lacks a bookstore. She also stated that UMASS should work on its image and establish itself as a more respected institution in the area.

THE MINORITY STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT UMASS

Name: Linda Laurie

Age: 18

Race: Black

Employment: Full-time, food service

Education: Boston High School

College I, dropout

Linda Laurie came to UMASS after her graduation from a Boston high school in September 1982. She lives in Dorchester with her parents. She dropped out of UMASS just before the end of the first semester. She is now working fulltime at a fast food establishment in Cambridge.

Linda's decision to go to college was influenced by her strong desire to become a nurse. Linda said, "I always wanted to be a nurse, since I was a little kid." She seems to have thought seriously about the idea of going to college from the start of her senior year in high school. She consulted with her parents, friends, high school teachers and guidance counselors about her decision. They all were encouraging and supportive, especially her parents who promised to make financial contributions.

Linda first applied to college in February 1982. She applied to UMASS and Northeastern University and was accepted by both. Cost and location influenced her decision to attend UMASS. (She lives within walking distance of the University). Her decision was also influenced by the reputation of the nursing program at UMASS, which was highly regarded according to her friends and associates.

Linda came to UMASS with a strong determination to succeed. She expected college to be a lot harder than high school with little free time to herself. Although she liked the idea of going to college, she was anxious, a bit frightened and doubtful about herself. As a graduate of an inner city public high school she felt that she would have to work harder than other students.

The first few days of college were totally confusing for Linda. Even her attendance at orientation did not enable her in finding where her classes were, where department offices were located or how to contact professors and tutors. Learning her way around the University was frustrating. She was uneasy and demoralized, but does not feel this influenced her subsequent decision to withdraw. She simply rationalized her initial confusion as an inevitable consequence of attending a new, large and complex institution. She also stated that many of her fellow freshmen were having the same sort of problems.

Linda took four classes and didn't seem to have any academic problems with any of these classes. Except for the chemistry professor, who was "hard and unfriendly", she established a good working relationship with all her professors. As for fellow students, Linda said that they were friendly and "got along well."

Linda's problems, which subsequently resulted in her withdrawal, started with the nursing department. As a prospective nursing student, Linda visited the nursing department during the first few weeks to get information on requirements. She was unable to obtain any information because "there was no one in the department except a secretary." Learning that there are no counselors in the nursing department who would explain the field and point out course requirements, Linda sought help from faculty members. The faculty members were inaccessible and "too busy". When Linda finally obtained the needed information, it was too late to change courses during the first semester. Most of the required courses were already closed for the second semester too.

At present Linda is working full time. She said she is very depressed and disappointed about her first semester's experience. However, this hasn't changed her career goal or her decision regarding college education. She plans to return to UMASS in September, 1984, in the nursing program. She hopes the nursing department will be more sympathetic and responsive. Linda is also considering Roxbury Community College as an alternative if UMASS refuses to renew her financial aid grant. Her income of $120 per week is not enough for tuition.

Except for the difficulty she had with the nursing department, Linda has had no problem with the rest of the University community. She stated that she has neither experienced nor witnessed any racial prejudice. She feels the administration is fair and fellow students tolerant. She has high praise for

the majority of the faculty members. Linda feels the University should improve the nursing program, hire more counselors, make financial aid available, and organize more flexible classes. She is particularly concerned about flexible scheduling since she plans to work while pursuing her education. She feels the availability of classes at all times of the day would be a critical factor in determining her ability to continue in the program.

Linda regrets her decision to drop out. Although unhappy about the way she was treated by the nursing department, she feels her reaction was a little extreme. Her commitment to return and complete a degree has increased in the months since she dropped out.

Name: Foster Haines

Age: 20

Race: Black

Employment: None

Education: Boston Public High School
Preparatory School--post graduate year
Enrolled, College II

Foster Haines came to UMASS from a New Hampshire preparatory school where he spent a post-graduate year preparing for college education. He is from Dorchester and graduated from the Boston public school system.

Foster's major reason for coming to UMASS was his interest in high technology. He believes, and was advised by many people, that "the future lies in high-tech". In order to prepare himself for the job market, Foster is planning to become an electrical engineer.

Foster made his career and educational decision with consultation only from the guidance counselor at his prep school. Even though his parents are encouraging and pleased, Foster alone decided to focus on high technology at UMASS. He seems firm and resolute in his career decision.

Foster applied last Spring to the University of New Hampshire, Saint Anselm, Northeastern, Boston University and the University of Massachusetts. He was accepted by UMASS and Northeastern. He stated that, although the pre-engineering program at UMASS and Northeastern are comparable, the cost at UMASS is considerably lower. He is also able to live at his parents' house in Dorchester, remaining close to his friends, some of whom attend UMASS.

Foster's initial expectations about UMASS were very positive. Although he knew there was going to be a lot of work in college, Foster was not intimidated. His year at the prep school has built up his confidence and improved his academic standing. As a sports star in high school, Foster was looking forward to playing for the University.

The first few weeks of college were very successful for Foster. He managed to make a sports team in his first tryout. He encountered little difficulty in registration. He was able to get all his courses including the popular courses in the pre-engineering program. His only complaints are that textbooks for the courses didn't arrive in time and that tutors assigned to him weren't available immediately. Although he has encountered some difficulty in physics and introduction to engineering, all his classes have gone well. He has high praise for his professors, whom he says have gone out of their way to help him. Despite missing orientation, Foster has had few problems adjusting to the University life. Like many of his fellow students, Foster was often confused about class location and which of the bureaucracy to turn to for help. However he wasn't disappointed or frustrated by his lack of

information. He said "I didn't think this was a real problem. I know I will eventually find my way around the University."

Foster is an active participant in the school activities. As a sports star, Foster is known by many of the students. He also belongs to another student group which meets on the campus regularly. Unlike many students, Foster feels very strongly about the University community and sees himself as representing the University when he participates in various sports events.

Foster is generally satisfied with UMASS. He feels that the administration has been very responsive and supportive to him as a minority student. He mingles with white students freely and has established strong friendships with many of them. He has, according to him, never been a victim of racial discrimination in the school. He admits that black students hang around together, but sees this as natural and not a manifestation of any racial tension in the school.

Foster is not worried about his future career. He believes his engineering degree will ensure a desirable and responsible job. He plans to transfer to Northeastern University in his third year, since UMASS has only a pre-engineering program. He believes the co-op program at Northeastern will help him make contacts with employers. He would, however, stay at UMASS if the University instituted a full engineering program.

CHAPTER VII

A MULTIVARIATE ASSESSMENT OF THE FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters we have examined many of the characteristics of the freshman experience at UMASS/Boston, and the degree to which these are associated with freshman persistence and satisfaction with the University. In this chapter a more formal approach to understanding the impact of experiences and background characteristics on freshman students is taken. Rather than looking for differences between groups of students, such as older and younger or minority and non-minority, we try to find the best set of predictors of the freshman outcomes of current enrollment status, anticipated persistence, and overall satisfaction with the university. In doing so clusters or groups of variables that have implications for designing and administering services for freshman are identified.

We have chosen to apply a relatively simple set of analytic procedures. Rather than simultaneously investigating all of the factors represented in our basic model (Figure 1.1, page 4), we look first at the relationship between each group and freshman commitment to UMASS/Boston. Our approach has been to:

(1) group the available survey measures into each of the categories in the model;

(2) scale the available measures within each category to obtain summary indicators of the quality of student experiences;

(3) conduct exploratory canonical correlation analyses to identify the relative strength of the associations between each group of predictor variables and the freshman outcomes, and to select from among the variables those that are most strongly associated with the outcomes; and

(4) perform regression analyses to determine the degree to which the freshman experiences and other variables account for differences in commitment to the university.

In the remainder of this chapter, each of these components of our analysis will be further described.

DATA REDUCTION AND SCALING

The data reduction and scaling activities are described in detail in Appendix B. The following scales were computed and used in the analysis:

Orientation Experiences

- Amount of Information from Orientation (EARLY INF)*
- Helpfulness of Orientation (ORIENT HELP)
- Helpfulness of Advisors (ADV HELP)
- Number of Early Sources of Information (INFO SOURCE)
- Early Confusion (INFO LACK)
- Social Support for Attending UMASS (parents, friends) (SOC SUPP)
- Early Quality of Life Factors that the University Can Control (registration, testing programs, services available in the first few weeks) (U CAN)
- Early Quality of Life Factors that the University Can't Control (location, parking) (U CAN'T)

Assessments of UMASS Services and Facilities

- Match between Expectations and Experiences (UMASS was WORSE and UMASS was BETTER than expected on eleven dimensions)
- Knowledge of Student Services (HEAR SERV)
- Use of Student Services (TRY SERV)

Academic Experiences

- Quality of Courses Rating (COURSE QUAL)
- Amount of Course Work Rating (AMT WORK)

* Abbreviations of each scale or variable name will be used in the tables in this chapter.

- Amount of Homework completed each week, on average (AMT HMWRK)
- Index of Perceived Academic Problems (ACAD PROB)

Social Experiences

- Number of Hours on Campus, on average, each week (HOURS)
- College Enrollment--Downtown versus Harbor (COLL)
- Index of Social Involvement in the University (SOC INV)
- Index of Perceived Social Problems (SOC PROB)

Financial/Work Issues

- Amount of Financial Aid (FIN AID)
- Perceived Financial Difficulty of Attending UMASS (FIN DIFF)
- Number of Hours Worked (HRS WRKED)
- Work/School Conflict (WRKDIFF)

Academic/Career Orientation

- Amount of Homework Completed in High School (HS HMWRK)
- Type of High School--public or private (HS TYPE)
- Career Orientation/Certainty of Career Goals (CAREER)
- Positive Academic Reasons for Selecting UMASS (academic reputation, special courses, diversity of students) (POS COME)
- Practical Reasons for Selecting UMASS (location of campus, costs) (PRAC COME).

Demographic/Personal Characateristics

- Parents Education (PAR ED)
- Financial Status of Family of Origin (FINBACK)
- Single Head of Household status (SINGHD)
- Living with Parents (PAR LIV)
- Living arrangments more typical for college age group (e.g., with friends if single, with spouse if married) (NORMLIV)

- o Family Obligations Interfering with School (FAM OBLIG)
- o Age (AGE)

University Commitment Variables

- o Enrollment status (ENROLL)
- o Expected Persistence (PERSIST)
- o Overall Satisfaction (SATIS)

EXPLORATORY MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

Our first effort to examine the relationship between the above predictor variables and the university commitment variables employed a canonical correlation technique. This approach is particularly appropriate in an analytic situation where multiple indicators and scales are being considered simultaneously as response variables. The procedure is useful in this situation because (1) it shows the general strength of the relationship between the group of predictor variables that are measuring the freshman experience and the group of three outcome variables; and (2) it permits us to identify those individual variables that seem to be making the greatest difference in commitment.

Without going into the statistical properties of the procedure,* the canonical correlation approach finds the "best" correlation between one set of variables and another set. In doing so, it calculates a canonical correlation coefficient, which indicates the strength of the relationship between one

* For those who are interested in more details about the canonical correlation procedure, an excellent, simple presentation may be found in the SPSS Manual. It should be pointed out that, although strictly speaking the canonical correlation procedure should be applied to interval and ratio type data, its exploratory use with ordered categorical data of the type that we have in the survey is considered by most statisticians to be acceptable. It should be cautioned, however, that the nature of our data precludes overinterpretation p-values or specific coefficients both for the variables in each canonical set, and for the correlation as a whole.

canonical variable (a weighted average of "predictor" variables) and another (a weighted average of the university commitment variables). It also computes a set of weights for each variable that is included in the procedure. These weights can help the analyst to determine the degree to which each variable contributes to the canonical correlation. In the tables below we will present both the overall canonical correlation coefficient, and the individual coefficients for each variable in the procedure.** The results of seven canonical correlations using the variable groups described above are presented in Tables 7.1 to 7.6. When discussing the overall canonical correlations, we use a significance level of .05 as a cutoff to determine an "interesting" finding. In the case of the variable coefficients, we have adopted an informal criteria of .20 or higher to determine whether the coefficient is worth discussing. It should be emphasized that the reader who is not familiar with canonical correlation procedures should refrain from interpreting the positive or negative signs of the variable coefficients. The degree to which relationships are positive or negative will be discussed in the text, and the reader can locate the direction of simple and partial relationships in tables that will be presented in the section following this one.

Orientation Experiences

The overall canonical correlation coefficient for orientation experience and commitment variable is .43 (Table 7.1). It therefore appears that the hypothesis is that the earliest contacts of freshmen with UMASS may have a lasting impact on their commitment to the university is supported.

** It is theoretically possible to obtain more than one significant canonical variable and correlation coefficient for each procedure. However, in this case a single significant canonical variable was found for each of the separate correlations except that for Financial/Work variables. In this case only the first canonial correlation will be reported.

TABLE 7.1

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN COMMITMENT
AND ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES

Coefficients for Commitment		Coefficients for Orient Experiences	
ENROLL STATUS	.08	EARLY INF	.15
SATISFACTION	-.97	ORIENT HELP	-.15
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	-.11	ADV. HELP	-.24
		INFO SOURCE	-.33
		INFO LACK	.28
		SOC SUPP	.24
		UCAN	.23
		UCANT	.36

Canonical Correlation .43
Sig = .0001

When we look more closely at the coefficients for the individual variables, however, some refinement of this interpretation must take place. First, the only commitment variable that has a high coefficient is the satisfaction variable. Thus, early experiences seem to have relatively little impact on the immediate propensity of the student to drop out (this, of course, has already been discussed in chapter 3), nor do they have much effect on the students' estimation of whether they will complete a degree at UMASS.

Looking further at the predictor variables, we find that orientation experiences contribute far less to the student's commitment to UMASS than do other variables tapping early experiences. Two variables stand out as being relatively more important, each having a coefficient of over 30. First, students who relied on multiple sources of information were more likely to be committed (and also, parenthetically, less likely to be confused by university procedures). This finding is strongly supported by our eight mini-case studies: in almost every case we find that a major difference between those who found the first few weeks a demoralizing experience and those who survived it gracefully was having a network of informants that could help with information and advice about how to make it through the system. This finding is reinforced by the fact that the "helpfulness of advisors" variable also has a coefficient of .24.

A second key factor is that the more committed students were more positive about the immutable characteristics of the university (in this case tapped by variables measuring location and parking facilities). It seems that if getting to school, and feeling comfortable once there are perceived as barriers during the first few weeks, then achieving solid integration into the community will be particularly difficult.

The remaining orientation experiences variables also make strong contributions to commitment, including the students' perception that they were often confused, having strong social support for attending, and positive assessments of university facilities and services that are likely to affect students during their orientation and registration experiences.

Overall Assessments of UMASS Services and Facilities

Table 7.2 shows that the student's overall assessment of their experiences with UMASS services and facilities has an even more potent affect on their commitment to the University. The correlation between the four assessment variables and the three commitment variables is .53, significant at the .0001 level. Again we find, however, that only the overall satisfaction with the university variable has a coefficient of over .20 (although in this case the anticipated persistence variable did have a much higher coefficient than it did in the case of orientation experiences.) Thus, we may conclude that, although the student's experiences with facilities and services may affect their persistence in the long run, it does not appear to have significant effects on plans made during their freshman year.

Two of the four predictor variables contributed to the correlation coefficient. The two measures of direct knowledge of and contact with the major university service centers for students (HEAR SERV and TRY SERV) have very weak coefficients. On the other hand, the match between what the student expected of university facilities and services, and what they actually found are extremely important in determining overall commitment. Research generally suggests that students often have vague and unrealistic expectations about college experiences. Clearly there will be some mismatch no matter how effectively the university attempts to prepare students. However, the case studies that we have included reveal over and over again that the rub between

TABLE 7.2

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN
COMMITMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES AND FACILITIES

Commitment Variables		Assessment Variables	
ENROLL STATUS	-.02	WORSE	-.62
SATISFACTION	-.91	BETTER	.52
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	-.17	HEAR SERV	.12
		TRY SERV	.07

Canonical Correlation .53
Sig. .0001

expectations and reality comes in two main areas. First, many students anticipate programs (academic) and personal services (academic and career counselling at the departmental level) that simply don't exist. In many instances this caused students to leave, or, at minimum, to express great dissatisfaction with the university.

The second concerns the "poor image" of UMASS (or ZOO MASS, as one respondent referred to it). In this case, many capable students who came for practical rather than positive reasons have found, to their surprise, that UMASS is a solid university with good professors and students, and excellent programs. The fact that they do not discover this until they come here suggests that there is a signficiant problem with the university's public relations and recruiting program.

Academic Experiences

The students' academic experiences and commitment to the university are also strongly associated, with a canonical correlation of .38, significant at the .0101 level (Table 7.3). In this case we find that the coefficients for both the satisfaction and the enrollment status variables reach our informal "significance" level of .20, suggesting that unlike the previous two canonical analyses, dropping out is affected by academic experiences.

Again, however, only two of the academic experience variables are of further interest using our informal criterion. The amount of homework the student does shows no relationship to commitment*, while the perceived burden of the amount of work in courses has a coefficient of .16. The strongest coefficient is associated with the student's rating of the quality of the

* The homework variable is not related to other academic experience variables, such as academic problems and the amount of work that the students perceive was required in their courses. Apparently, homework is related to personal characteristics that we have not measured.

TABLE 7.3

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN
COMMITMENT AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Commitment Variables		Academic Experience Variables	
ENROLL STATUS	-.22	COURSE QUAL	.91
SATISFACTION	1.01	AMT WRK	-.17
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	.05	ACAD PROB	.20
		AMT HMWORK	-.03

Canonical Correlation .39
Sig. .0001

courses that they took (a coefficient of .90). However, the index of academic problems is also associated (.20).

It is often assumed that in commuter colleges academic experiences will have the main effect in determining student commitment. It is argued that because commuter students have lower expectations for the social life on campus, are often older, and have major job and family commitments off campus, that the quality and success of their academic experiences will determine whether they are satisfied and stay. (See Tinto, 1975, Chickering, 1974; Pascarella, et al. 1983). Our preliminary exploratory analysis suggests that this interpretation is too limited in the case of freshmen. Not only do the academic experience variables show a lower relationship to the commitment variables than the previous two groups discussed (and several to come below), but the relationship that does exist is accounted for primarily by perceived quality of courses, with a more limited contribution by our measure of academic concerns and problems.

Clearly the latter will become increasingly important as students move through their university careers. However, as our case studies show, most of the students who come--even those who have performed well in high school--anticipate that they will have academic problems during the first semester or two. Therefore, they are generally not surprised when problems occur, and are able to handle them (presumably short of failing several courses) with some equinimity. Unlike their confrontation with imagined university facilities and services that they have limited ability to anticipate, the students have had experiences with course work and its requirements, and are able to make at least some preadjustments to facilitate their academic integration.

Social Integration and University Commitment

Social experiences are even less potent as correlates of university commitment, although they are still significantly related (a coefficient of .25, significant at the .001 level, is shown in Table 7.4). The commitment variables that are weighted most heavily in this analysis are satisfaction (1.08) and anticipated persistence (-.33). The coefficient for enrollment status is below our informal "significance level". This suggests that, although social integration is less important in predicting early commitment responses (e.g., dropping out during the first year) than many of the other factors that we have discussed, it contributes more strongly to expected persistence at UMASS than might have been predicted from previous studies of commuter schools and commuter students (Chickering, 1974). Again, only two of the four social integration variables show strong contributions to the canonical correlation. The social involvement index, which taps the degree to which the respondent has participated in university sponsored social activities and has made on-campus friends, has a coefficient of -.68. The index of social problems has a coefficient of .63.

It should be pointed out that social problems are not disconnected from other aspects of the freshman adjustment process. For example, the index of social problems and that of academic problems are positive and significantly correlated (r = .27). Students who have social problems also have a generally poor reaction to the university--the social problems index is correlated with the "UMASS is worse than expected" index at r = .22. People who have low social involvement also have limited networks for obtaining information about the university from other sources (the correlation between SOC INV and ASK MANY is .25. sig .01), and have lower levels of social support for their decision to come to UMASS (SOC SUPP and SOC INV are correlated at r = .21).

TABLE 7.4

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN
COMMITMENT AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Commitment Variables		Social Integration Variables	
ENROLL STATUS	-.02	SOC INV	-.68
SATISFACTION	1.09	HOURS	.10
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	-.33	SOC PROB	.63
		COLL	.02

Canonical Correlation .26
Sig. .001

Thus, people have limited social integration into the university may also be handicapped in their adjustment process in multiple ways.

Financial and Work Issues

Financial issues and work conflict have a lower association with university commitment than might be anticipated--the lowest, in fact, of any variable group except the demographic characteristics of the students. The canonical correlation is .24, significant at the .005 level (Table 7.5). The coefficients for the commitment variables indicate that all three meet our .20 criteria for "significance", although, not surprisingly, the strongest coefficient is with enrollment status (1.05). All predictor variables show coefficients over .20, with the strongest coefficient being the number of hours that the student works (.84). These findings suggest that financial considerations, including financial aid, the need to work, and the relationship between work commitments and school commitments have a deeply intertwined, but more modest relationship to persistence than groups that have been examined above. As was noted in Chapter 3, financial and work conflicts may become a factor in the determination to drop out of school, but they are only rarely the decisive factor. Indeed, our case study materials reveal that the students who have some financial difficulties and work conflicts react to these in rather different ways depending on their level of commitment. In fact, we may question the direction of prediction in this case: it may be that less committed students are simply more sensitive to financial and work pressures than students who are deeply committed to their university career.

Academic/Career Orientation

The career predispositions and academic preparation that students bring with them to UMASS have a potent association with their commitment to the university during the first year. Table 7.6 indicates that the canonical

TABLE 7.5

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN
COMMITMENT AND FINANCIAL/WORK ISSUES

Commitment Variables		Financial/Work Variables	
ENROLL STATUS	1.05	FINAID	-.32
SATISFACTION	-.31	FINDIFF	-.34
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	-.36	HRS WRKED	.84
		WRKDIFF	.24

Canonical Correlation .24
Sig. .005

TABLE 7.6

CANONICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN
COMMITMENT AND ACADEMIC/CAREER ORIENTATION

Commitment Variables		Academic/Work Orientation Variables	
ENROLL STATUS	-.29	CAREER	-.38
SATISFACTION	-.71	H.S. TYPE	-.08
ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	.55	H.S. HMWRK	-.07
		POS COME	.84
		PRAC COME	-.08

Canonical Correlation .43
Sig. .0001

correlation coefficient is .43, significant at the .0001 level. Furthermore, all three of the commitment variables show strong individual coefficients: enrollment status is .29, general satisfaction is -.71 and anticipated persistence is -.55. Most of the canonical correlation is accounted for, however, by only two of the "predictor" variables: the respondents' certainty about their career goals (-.38) and their scores on the index of positive reasons for choosing to attend UMASS (.84). Score on the other three variables (public/private high school; amount of homework in high school; practical reasons for attending UMASS) are negligible.

Thus, it appears that freshman at UMASS who come with a combination of clear personal goals that are tied to their choice of UMASS over other institutions are likely to become more committed during the early stages of their career. It should also be emphasized that those who come to UMASS for positive reasons are likely to be part of a "self fulfilling prophecy"--they are more likely to report positive orientation experiences, more positive overall assessments of the semester (they tend to find the University to be even better than their expectations) and they tend to like their courses more. In other respects they are like their classmates. They are also older. Career goal certainty is not, however, strongly associated with other student characteristics or experiences, and thus may have a more independent effect on commitment. Our case studies reveal that career commitment may help to overcome many other barriers for students. In the case of Maria Madio, her initial disappointment at not getting into the schools that she wanted to go to was overcome during her first semester by her determination to succeed in becoming a doctor. Linda Laurie, on the other hand, will return to UMASS despite her disappointment with the first semester because she still retains a

strong desire to become a registered nurse, a goal that she cannot reach without a degree from UMASS.

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics that we included in our analysis produce no significant canonical correlations with commitment (table not presented). Thus, many of the factors that have previously been thought to help determine persistence--such as non-traditional status, socio-economic background and parental education--are not major factors in determining freshman dropout rates at UMASS. This should be perceived as a very positive finding in an institution that has held up the goal of providing high quality university education to a diverse set of students, many of whom would feel "out of place" in other local institutions.

NEXT STEPS: REFINING A MODEL OF FRESHMAN PERSISTENCE

The results of the canonical correlation analyses were encouraging, for they suggested that the elements of our model of greatest interest to the UMASS administration--e.g., those factors that they can affect--also showed strong, positive associations with the three commitment variables. In addition, the canonical correlations also indicated that each of the three commmitment variables contributes to some of the canonical relationships. Although the commitment variable featured most prominently in the canonical coefficients is overall satisfaction with the university, enrollment status and anticipated persistence have high weights in one or more of the canonical procedures discussed. Two further steps therefore seemed appropriate: first, to explore the possibility of creating a single commitment variable, which would permit a more stable and reliable measure than any of the single variables; and second, to perform a regression analysis to determine more

precisely the power of each of the variables in predicting commitment and persistence. These steps are important because the canonical analyses do not permit us to precisely assess the degree to which the variables of interest account for commitment.

Scaling Commitment

The relationships among the three commitment variables were also significant and positive (see Table 7.7). Thus, it was decided to simply add the three. We felt that the greatest weight should be given to the overall assessment variable, since it had shown the strongest weights in the canonical correlations; and the least to the enrollment status variable, which had the lowest cumulative weights. Since the number of points in each of the scales corresponded to the above preference to weight the items (the assessment variable was a four point scale, the anticipated persistence variable a three point scale, and the enrollment variable a dichotomous scale), we decided simply to add them. Respondents who did not answer any one of the items were counted as missing.

The resulting scale theoretically ranged from 3 (low on all three items) to 8 (high on all three items). While the distribution of this new "commitment" variable is somewhat skewed toward higher levels of commitment, the distribution nevertheless reflects the full range of the scale, with 23 students showing the lowest possible score, and 74 showing the highest.

Regressions of Predictor Variables on Commitment

Regressions were conducted using only the variables that were found to have a weight of .20 or greater in the previously discussed canonical

TABLE 7.7

PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN COMMITMENT VARIABLES

		1	2	3
1.	ENROLLMENT STATUS	-	-	-
2.	SATISFACTION	.26	-	-
3.	ANTICIPATED PERSISTENCE	.34	.41	-

* All significant at .01 or better

correlations.* Because many of the variables could be eliminated, it was decided to compute a smaller number of regression equations, using only three "groups" of predictor variables: early orientation experiences; assessments of the total semester, including services, academic experiences and social integration; and all of the "background" variables, including career orientation, demographic characteristics, and financial/work status. The stepwise regression procedure was employed, with no forced order of entry. The results of the three regression procedures are presented in Tables 7.8, 7.9, and 7.10.

Commitment and Orientation Experiences. The experiences that the student has during the first few weeks of the semester are affirmed as a relatively potent predictor of how committed the student will be to UMASS. The six variables that were included in the equation predicted 13 percent of the variance in commitment levels (see Table 7.8). While this level of prediction is not overwhelmingly high, it is also not negligible. By accounting for over a tenth of the student's potential for completing a degree at UMASS solely on the basis of their experiences during the orientation period, the data suggest that these two or three weeks are, in fact, a powerful lever that the university can use to increase retention and overall satisfaction.

Perhaps more important from a program design perspective is the fact that five of the six variables contribute significantly to the equation--the number of sources of information that students use regularly, the overall level of confusion or lack of information students' feel, their rating of the usefulness of their contacts with the advisory system, the social support

* Simple correlations were also examined to ensure that potentially significant variables were not being arbitrarily excluded. None of the excluded variables was highly correlated with the three dependent variables.

TABLE 7.8

REGRESSION OF COMMITMENT ON ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES

Variables	R^2	Beta	Simple R
ASK MANY	.05	-.16	9.41*-.23
UCANT	.09	.13	5.75* .19
INFO LACK	.10	.12	5.04* .17
SOC SUPP	.12	.13	5.53* .20
ADV HELP	.13	-.11	4.57*-.18
UCAN	.13	.01	.10 .16

Multiple r_2 = .36
Multiple r^2 = .13

* Significant at .05 or better

inside and outside of the university for their adjustment, and the student's reaction to the location and physical characteristics of the university. All of these variables have modest beta coefficients, which suggests that there is no one among them that is a key factor in strengthening the student's potential for commitment: rather, it is likely to be a cumulative set of experiences--either positive or negative--during the first few weeks that sets a key tone for the entire semester, and perhaps for the student's entire career.

It should be pointed out that, although attendance at and satisfaction with orientation are not as important as the variables that we have used here, the orientation may serve as a mechanism for setting the important experiences into place. For example, the student who misses orientation may fail to understand the advisory system; will miss out on the first opportunity to meet fellow students who may serve as friends and sources of support, and may lack critical information that increases his/her confusion. Thus, while the specifics of orientation are not as important as other factors, its role as a catalyst should not be entirely overlooked.

Later Experiences and Commitment. Table 7.9 shows that the student's later experiences in the semester have an even greater effect on commitment levels. The multiple R^2 for the equation indicates that almost one quarter of the variance in commitment is predicted by the six variables included in the equation. Thus, the data suggest again that, insofar as the University can improve the first semester experience for students, persistence at the University may be increased.

Furthermore, of the four variables whose contribution to the equation is significant, several are suggestive of areas where program improvement could make a difference. The two variables that do not achieve significant

TABLE 7.9

REGRESSION OF COMMITMENT ON LATER EXPERIENCES

Variables	R^2	Beta	Simple R
WORSE	.17	-.29	31.26*-.41
COURSE QUALITY	.20	-.16	10.24*-.28
BETTER	.22	.15	8.09* .34
SOC INV	.24	.12	6.52* .17
ACAD PROB	.24	-.04	.63 -.12
SOC PROB	.24	.02	.29 -.08

Multiple r_2 = .49
Multiple r^2 = .24

* Significant at .05 or better

regression coefficients are the scales of academic problems and social problems. While a better program, a better counseling system and a more active campus life might have some impact on these variables, on the whole these generic reactions to the semester appear to be, as we have seen in previous chapters, more idiosyncratic responses to personal experiences than easily predictable problems. That is, using the personal and background characteristics that we have included, it is not easy to predict in advance who is most likely to have academic and social difficulties (although again, younger students do seem to have greater difficulties in this area than non-traditional students.)

On the other hand, the strong contribution of the "services and facilities were worse than I expected" scale (Beta = -.29) suggests that the freshman commitment is deeply affected by misinformation about the programs and services that are available from the university. While one cannot, of course, eliminate all false expectations about an experience which is, by definition, novel, our case studies suggest strongly that many students come without critical information (such as whether the major that they desire is available) and make it through at least one semester without other key information (such as the requirements for a selected major). Since students also seem to come with falsely low expectations of the University and the case studies also reveal very poor "images" of UMASS among potential applicants, we must suggest strongly that an underlying problem with the University program of student recruitment, and pre-application information and counseling (or contact with local high schools guidance counselors) has been located. It appears from this data that many of the problems with retention, satisfaction and persistence are not necessarily cured on the campus, but should be dealt with before students come.

The student's level of social involvement (which also contributes significantly to commitment) may also be amenable to university intervention. It has been observed that a key factor in the higher drop-out rate at commuter schools is the lack of social integration of students through the constant interaction with their peers. (Chickering, 1974). Although some groups of students (such as older students who have many external obligations and those who work full or nearly full time) are difficult to involve in university sponsored activities, many who have the time are still very detatched from campus life. Yet, even at a commuter school our case studies suggest that satisfying levels of social involvement may be possible, although still lower than at a typical residential campus.

But, the fact remains that the UMASS campus is distinctively ill suited to supporting student involvement because of its physical plant and the dispersion of student social centers. This problem has been raised on many previous occasions but has yet to be solved. While the assertive and socially outgoing do well in the UMASS environment, the shy, the confused and the less self-assured student may have contact with their peers only in class or on the intercampus bus.

The final significant contributor to commitment within this group of variables is the student's rating of the quality of his/her courses. This variable is the one that we would perceive as being least amenable to improvement through program changes at the administrative level. Since the majority of students are pleased with their courses and their professors, we suspect that there is little more that the University could do to directly affect student reactions to their classes. Of course, a better counseling and advisory system might make it easier for students to shift their schedules

around during the first few weeks of the semester to avoid inappropriate or poor courses.

"Background" and Commitment. The combined set of background variables that were used in this regression analysis predict almost one-fifth of the variance in freshman commitment (R^2 = .19, Table 7.10). While this is a rather significant level of prediction, it is not so high that one could argue that the characteristics that UMASS students bring with them condition most of their responses during the first year. Indeed, background variables have less impact on commitment than do the student assessments of their first semester experiences, although more than the experiences of their first few weeks. Only three of the eight variables included in the equation have significant regression coefficients, however: having positive reasons for coming, being older, and coming from a family with a higher socio-economic status.

THE SIMPLEST MODEL OF COMMITMENT

After the above discussion, one remaining question may be of concern to administrators who are attempting to piece together an understanding of what makes a student more or less committed to UMASS. In order to shed a bit more light on this we calculated a final regression equation in which we entered all the variables that had significant regression coefficients in the previous equations. Again the procedure used was a stepwise regression, in which each variable enters the equation in the order which increases the variance explained by the greatest amount. In this case, a five variable equation produced the most parsimonious model, in that adding any further variable (1) increased the variance explained by less than 1 percent and (2) further entry of variables produced insignificant regression coefficients (see Table 7.11).

TABLE 7.10

REGRESSION OF COMMITMENT ON BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Variables	R^2	Beta	F	Simple R
POS COME	.13	.31	31.38*	.36
WRKDIFF	.15	.09	2.80	.13
AGE	.16	.11	2.72*	
FINBACK	.17	.11	3.98*	.14
FINAID	.18	.07	1.84	.08
CAREER	.18	-.07	1.64	-.17
FINDIFF	.19	.06	1.09	.12
SINGHO	.19	.04	.35	.07
(NOT ENTERED)**				
(HRS WRKED)	-	-	-	-
(NORM LIV)	-	-	-	-

Multiple r = .43
Multiple r^2 = .19

* Sig. at .05 or better
** These variables reduced the significance of the equation below .05.

TABLE 7.11

REGRESSION OF COMMITMENT ON REDUCED SET OF EXPERIENCE AND BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Variables	R^2	Beta	F
WORSE	.16	-.22	16.25*
POS COME	.22	.18	12.71*
COURSE QUALITY	.25	-.13	6.66*
SOC INV	.27	.14	7.81*
AGE	.29	.16	10.64*
INFO LACK	.30	.08	2.73*
SOC SUPP	.31	.05	1.18
BETTER	.31	.07	1.79
ACAD PROB	.31	-.05	.91
ASK MANY	.31	.03	.28
FINBACK	.31	.02	.24
ADV HELP	.31	-.17	.13
UCANT	.31	.01	.09

Multiple r_2 = .56
Multiple r^2 = .31

* Sig. at .05 or better

The five variables together explain 29 percent of the variance in commitment.* In this case, the five variables that, together, best predict commitment are: perceiving the services and facilities to be worse than expected, having positive reasons for coming, being satisfied with the quality of courses, being socially involved in campus life, and being older. The implications of each of these variables, and other findings that have emerged in the previous chapters, will be discussed in the remaining chapter.

* This should be viewed as a finding of great practical significance. Although over 2/3 of the variance was not explained by the simplest model, it should be emphasized that the measures used in the survey and the model were necessarily rather crude because of limitations of time, money and survey length. In general social scientists are very pleased to explain such a large percentage of the variance based on simple attitudinal and reported behavioral measures.

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CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study has been to provide information to help the University determine whether there are areas of program or service improvement that might help increase student commitment to the University. We have looked at the students' satisfaction with that experience, the degree to which experiences are associated with their tendency to drop out during or just after the first semester, and the quality of experiences for non-traditional populations that the University is determined to serve effectively. Finally, we have tried to identify those characteristics of students and their experiences that best account for their commitment to the University, using indicators that reflect the likelihood that they will persist at UMASS through their entire degree program.

The overall conclusion that may be drawn is clear: the experiences that the freshman student has during the first semester do affect both short and long-term commitment to the University, and many of the experiences that are most strongly associated with commitment are amenable to University intervention. Given this conclusion, it is appropriate to highlight some of the major findings, and to summarize some of their programmatic implications.

It should be emphasized that our goal in this chapter is not to propose specific programs to strengthen services and improve experiences that seem particularly crucial for the quality of life for freshmen. This task is more appropriate for University administrators who have more experience with such programs, and more knowledge of the resources that are available to initiate new programs or improve old ones. However, as part of the University

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community, we believe that we are in an excellent position to interpret the survey and case findings in order to point to general problem areas and priorities for action.

OVERALL SATISFACTION

The survey data indicate that most students are generally satisifed with the University experience, although only a third could be classified as enthusiastic. In particular, a large proportion believe that their freshman experiences have turned out to be better than they expected, particularly in the academic areas--the quality of courses, of professors, and of academic support in general.

On the other hand, the survey data also indicate areas in need of improvement in services and structures to support freshmen:

- The vast majority of students complain about registration problems, including the inability to register for courses that they needed. Registration was, for over one quarter of the students, the worst thing that happened to them during the semester.
- A large proportion of students seem to "fall through the cracks" of the initial orientation and advisory system, and subsequently lack good information about university procedures, services and regulations.
- Similarly, a large proportion of students lack even basic information about student services, and consequently do not take advantage of them. The lack of information about services that actually exist leads to expressed dissatisfaction.
- Those who know about and use student services are generally satisfied with them--with the exception of financial aid, where nearly one-third were dissatisfied.

Since all of these problems involve activities and structures that the university can easily affect, we would recommend a comprehensive review of the mechanisms by which the University seeks to introduce its students to the University. The most general need is for a more integrated approach to providing students with initial assistance. Some key goals are to:

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- o Create more redundant messages to incoming freshmen about two important areas that can deeply affect their satisfaction: (1) requirements for courses, and career/major counseling in general; and (2) available services. Improving the clarity and frequency of these messages should start but not end with orientation;

- o Improve academic counseling and support for students. It is clear that the number of students who need and are not getting support is greater than it should be, and these students are very likely to become disaffected and drop out.

The case study and survey data reveal that students--even generally satisfied students--must be persistent and assertive in order to find and get information and services that they want. The freshmen who seem to be least satisfied and well adjusted to UMASS are those who look most like the traditional "urban campus" student: they have just graduated from high school, have poorly focused career goals, and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

We suggest that, in its desire to create a hospitable environment for the older and nontraditional student, the university may have overlooked the fact that the bulk of the freshman class (although not necessarily the UMASS student body as a whole) is composed of reasonably traditional students. Older students have special needs, but so do those who are younger and UMASS may have made its environment a bit too "adult" to provide appropriate support to these younger students. Some ways in which the University could help are to:

- o Improve social opportunities and structures to appeal to more traditional students--e.g., those who are younger, unmarried, and in school full time. These are students whose career commitment and academic goals are less clear, and who therefore rely more heavily on social relationships as the cement of their relationship to the institution.

- o Develop more assertive outreach from key student services to bring in younger students who may have stronger needs but less experience in working within a large bureaucracy.

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DROPPING OUT

Several key findings regarding dropouts emerged from our analysis:

- Student demographic and background characteristics have almost no statistical relationship to enrollment status;
- The objective indicators of student experiences (e.g., their reports of what they did) during the first semester show almost no relationship to their enrollment status;
- However, the dropout student's reactions to their experiences are markedly different, and more negative. In particular, they are more likely to criticize courses, the quality of instruction, and the support that they received for their academic and personal needs. In addition, they were less likely to feel that they made friends at the University;
- Dropout student experiences differed from non-dropouts in one key area: they were less likely to have received financial aid, despite the fact that they were just as likely to have applied. Many indicated that they dropped out for financial reasons;
- There are some indications that the group of dropouts may, in fact, be composed of two sub-populations: relatively satisfied students who drop out for personal reasons that the University cannot affect (and who often plan to return), and very dissatisfied students, who feel ill-served by the University in both academic, service and social areas, and who do not plan to return.

The findings suggest, however, several areas that could use considerable improvement. Perhaps the most notable difference between dropouts and non-dropouts is that those who persist know how to get the services that they want, to find out what courses to enroll in, and have other "survival skills" that make their beginning weeks of the first semester easier. While the University cannot compensate for all of the problems expressed by dropouts with information and support some things could help.

- The application procedures should be used to inform students that programs of study that they might want are not available. This would help to reduce an area of severe disappointment for a significant proportion of the students.
- There is a need for early student orientation to available programs and services, and as mentioned above. An advisory program with more assertive outreach during the first few weeks could help to avoid

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some of the problems expressed by students, and to ensure that those who were still inappropriately enrolled would either readjust their goals, or leave earlier.

In addition, those who drop out seem to have a cluster of academic needs that emerge later in the semester that are not being met. They feel that they have sought but not received help. While this may be due to the fact that some dropouts are less knowledgeable and persistent in looking for help, this finding suggests a need to:

- o review the mechanisms for actively following up on students who seek academic support to determine whether they need additional or different help. The effectiveness of any attempts to locate "at risk" students will require better mechanisms for referral and followup between services.

The above discussion has emphasized recommendations for reducing dropouts. It should be reemphasized that, in most ways, the students who drop out are very similar to those who stay. One key to the "no difference" finding is that over 40 percent of those who drop out plan to return to UMASS. This suggests that, despite dissatisfactions with first semester experiences, their commitment to the institution and their career goals have not been completely undermined. Many of the reasons that students report for leaving have little to do with the University experience, but are more likely to relate to pressures outside of the University. Many of these could not be helped by University services or support — a spouse's unemployment, a difficult pregnancy, a child's illness or problems in altering a work schedule are factors that no university can be expected to deal with.

Overall, we believe that the "dropout problem" at UMASS should not be overestimated. Rather, the problem should be reformulated more broadly as a commitment to getting and keeping the kinds of students who are most likely to benefit from UMASS.

"NONTRADITIONAL" STUDENTS

There is strong support in our data to suggest that the non-traditional student is well served by UMASS/Boston. CPCS students tend to be more satisfied in almost all areas, to display more commitment to the University, and to have a stronger career focus than younger students. This is true despite the following problems of CPCS students:

- o CPCS students are older, and tend to have greater outside obligations which interfere with their academic work;
- o They spend less time on campus, and are less socially integrated;
- o They are more likely to be confused about requirements and courses. The orientation and advisory procedures seem to have been particularly confusing in CPCS;
- o They are more likely to report concerns about their academic performance and their writing.

On the other hand, they are also more likely to work hard (do more homework), just as likely to seek out university services as other students (although in some cases they must make special trips to the Harbor campus to get services), and more satisfied with them when they do seek them out. One clear recommendation to improve the student experience at CPCS is to:

- o Provide better written and orally presented materials regarding the special nature of the competency based program, and to improve the advisory system within the programs to make it more accessible to students who are on campus for short periods of time.

MINORITY STUDENTS

Minority students, who make up almost one quarter of the freshmen, also appear to be a generally satisfied group of students. They are more likely to be female, older, have children and, if employed, work longer hours than other students. They are also more likely to be foreign born, find attending UMASS to be financially difficult, and to perceive that they must "work harder than other students to get by", and have general academic problems.

The role strains that these characteristics may imply seem not to affect their experiences at the University to a major degree, however, perhaps because minority students are also:

- Just as likely to seek out services to support their academic performance during the first semester;
- More likely to feel well served by the various formal structures of the University;
- More satisfied with the social life;
- More likely to receive financial aid; and
- More committed to obtaining a degree from UMASS.

We conclude from this analysis that student programs and services are especially effective with regard to minority students. While improvement is aways possible, this is not a special problem area at the current time.

IMPLEMENTING IMPROVED FRESHMEN PROGRAMS

One issue facing the University in implementing these suggestions is the fact that formal student services are often less effective in reaching freshmen, particularly in the early weeks of school, than informal mechanisms. We have demonstrated that students who seek out University services are typically better adjusted to the University than those who do not. However, during the crucial orientation period, it is not reasonable to expect that all those who need help can be identified and reached.

We also know that students are most likely to turn to other students for assistance. We suggest that this tendency could be capitalized on as one mechanism for improving freshmen experiences. Drawing upon upperclass student volunteers to act as "buddies", using students to develop additional orientation materials, written from the student perspective, and using upperclassmen to help counsel and recruit more appropriate students are relatively low cost means of improving initial and later commitment. This suggestion is

intended to supplement other new programs or efforts to improve coordination that take place within the current set of formal student services. The use of student-to-student outreach mechanisms is likely to be particularly effective with the younger, more traditional college-age students, and might also have the side-effect of promoting more rapid social integration.

THE IMAGE OF UMASS

One of the major issues that emerged in the multivariate analysis, and through the case studies, is the mismatch of expectations and experiences for many UMASS students. Too many students apparently come with unrealistic expectations about what the university has to offer. In some ways more worrisome, however, is the high proportion of students who report that UMASS is much better than they expected. The fact that many of the student spontaneously mention the poor image of UMASS in the general population of potential applicants--a reputation that many freshmen have come to feel is undeserved--should be of considerable concern to the University community. In our view, an unanticipated finding of the study is that the value of UMASS is such a well-kept secret.

Although the University should clearly be vigilant in designing services to improve student commitment, one simple way of increasing commitment is to ensure that the right students come, and come in greater numbers. Our multivariate model indicated that students who come for "positive reasons"--in other words, students who are knowledgeable about the special resources and programs of UMASS--are among the most likely to thrive.

Thus, our final recommendations concern not the existing set of student services and programs, but the public relations and outreach activities of the

University. Among the most efficient ways of improving the quality of the freshman experience is to:

- o improve the quality and amount of information that students have before they come, or even before they apply. This will contribute to their making the appropriate choice of UMASS as a post-secondary institution. Outreach through area high schools will not be sufficient, although it is certainly a component of an improved pre-application support system. Since many students do not have access to or do not see a High School Advisor, it is also important to provide better materials and application forms that would permit improved pre-screening.

- o provide more and better public information, geared toward the populations that UMASS would like to attract. Increasing knowledgeability is likely to increase applicants who come for positive reasons.

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